

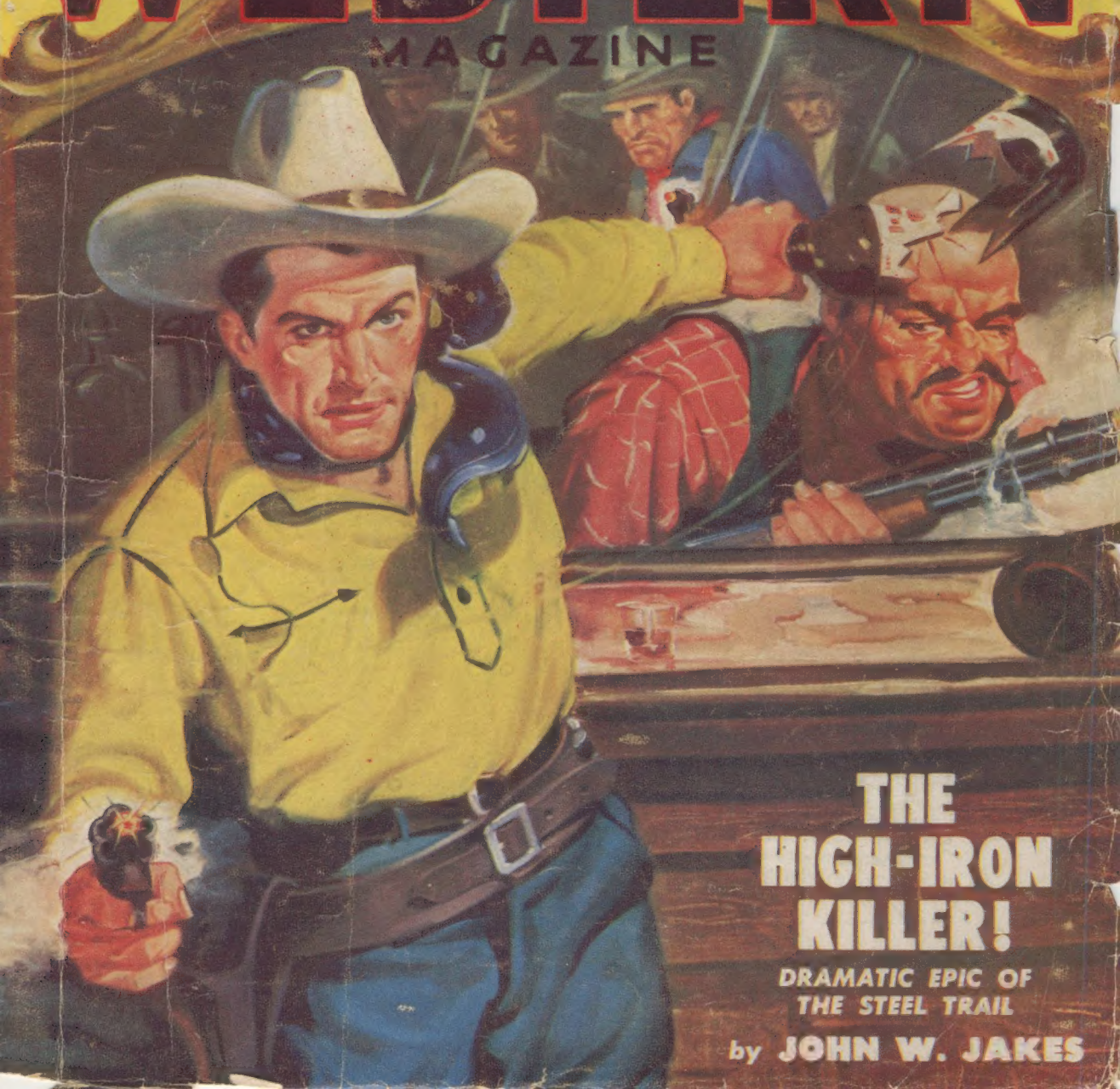
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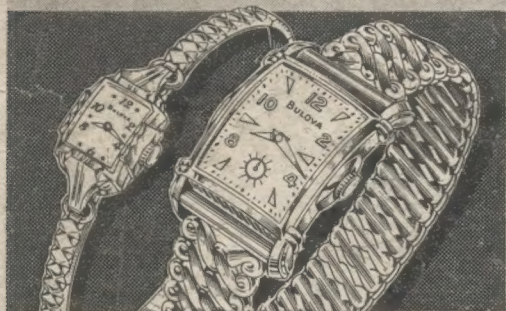


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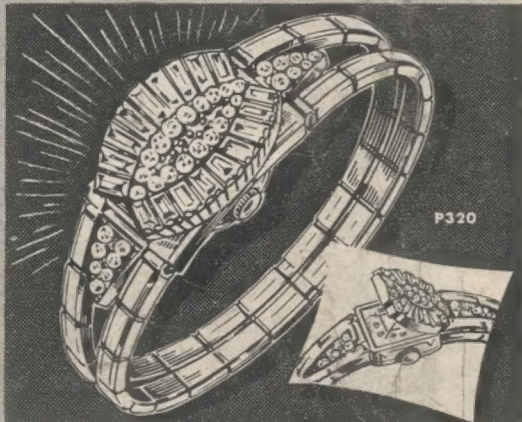
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ROUND-UP

By THE EDITOR

THE West wasn't made solely by law officers who ran down badmen, renegades and rustlers. Miners, cow-punchers, ranchers played their parts as well, but perhaps just as important were the men who brought in the supplies to mining towns and frontier prairie settlements. Transportation was usually by pack mules or huge, rugged freight wagons, drawn by a span of six to eight oxen.

Driving one of those heavy wagons was a chore for a real man, with the lung power of a foghorn, and a vocabulary that outshone that of the saltiest drill sergeant. Many were the tights these bullwhackers got into and had to get out of under their own steam, ingenuity, and by dint of sheer guts.

Here, C. L. Davis tells of Buck Lincoln and some of his troubles along the freighter trail.

It was a dreaded moment in the life of Buck Lincoln, ace bullwhacker, as his team of eight fretting oxen plodded along the scorched Nebraska prairie, dust from their

hoofs aggravating their parched throats. He saw his leaders waver and veer off to the right of the sun-baked, rutted trail. They had smelled water.

Walking beside the wheelers, the big, heavily muscled teamster uncoiled his long, heavy bull whip.

"Tom! Jerry!" he bawled at the leaders. "Haw!"

Roaring with profanity, he grasped the three-foot-long hickory butt with both hands and whirled the whip several times around his head, the twenty-foot lash of plaited leather whistling in the dry air before it rolled out. The split rawhide cracker struck a bare place on Jerry's rump with unerring accuracy.

That brought the leaders back in line, but it was too late to halt the rush. Directly behind the leaders, Red and Roan, the lead swing yoke, bawled and swung out of line. Then Dick and Dan, the wheel-swingers, broke their stride, and Chuck and Turk, the huge wheelers, yoked to the wagon tongue,

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

followed suit. They had smelled water, too.

Lincoln cracked his huge whip again and again over the backs of the steers, and his voice rose in choice expletives as he tried vainly to head off impending disaster.

"Red, you ornery devil! Dick, you wall-eyed son of Satan! Damn you, Turk! Git over there, Dan, 'fore I salivate you! You, Roan, what do you think you're tryin' to do?"

Each directed threat was punctuated with a whip crack as his strident voice rose above the sound of bawling steers and thundering hoofs, but he was careful not to draw blood with the stinging whip. In spite of the efforts of the well-trained leaders to stay in line, however, the other yoked pairs pulled them aside. There was little for Tom and Jerry to do but string along with the rest now, if they expected to retain their leadership. They struck off across the Nebraska plains.

Buck Lincoln ran to head off the leaders. Threats having failed, he resorted to cajolery. His voice was soft and pleading as he begged the beasts to take it easy. But the four yokes of oxen lumbered on, the heavy freight wagons with their two and a half tons of cargo reeling and swaying behind them. He fought the steers to keep them in line and the wagon upright.

With a feeling of relief he saw the natural pond ahead just over a low rise. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all. The leaders trotted to the edge of the cracked mud banks, and paused to dip their muzzles in the shallow water, but the other six steers pushed them on. Luckily, the wagon stopped upright, its front wheels sinking in the mud as the four yokes drank their fill.

It could have been worse. An overturned wagon and scattered cargo often resulted from such mishaps, and sometimes the wagon was damaged beyond repair. Even when the wagon remained upright it was a job to get it headed back in the right

direction, and it was often necessary to unhitch the team, hook them to the rear and pull it backward a ways.

In this day of streamlined, diesel-powered transportation, it is difficult to realize the hardships and difficulties that faced the frontier bullwhacker. In the days following the Civil War, he hauled supplies and equipment for frontier military posts, settlements and mining camps at a snail's pace of two and a half miles per hour.

Lincoln, who served two forts in Nebraska, as well as the hell-roaring town of Deadwood, S. D., in the late '70s and early '80s, often spent weeks on the trail, his diet consisting of biscuits and beans, supplemented with game he chanced to kill on the trail. His steers needed only the prairie grass they munched before lying down at night. They could drink brackish water, too, and required little watching at night. They were just too tired to wander away.

Assisted by his trained dog, Shep, who knew each steer by name when the "roll" was called, it was an easy matter to corral them next morning. They were yoked in pairs, the steer's neck in the U part of the ox bow, and fastened by bow pins inserted through the top of the yoke.

Most of the other words in the bullwhacker's vocabulary, however, are unprintable, and exceeded the vitriol of the old-time steamboat captain or mule-skinner. Asked for a demonstration of his father's commands, the son of one old-time freighter of the Santa Fé Trail replied:

"I can't cuss like that."

* * *

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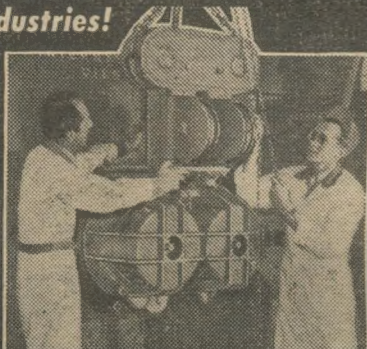
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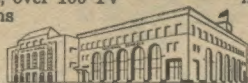
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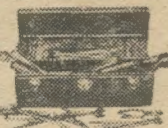
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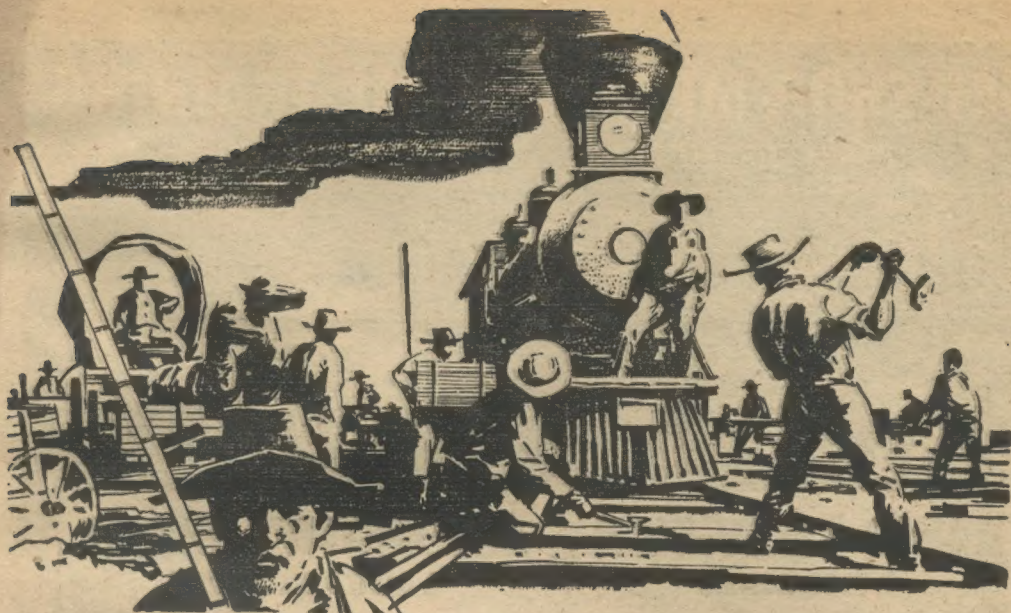
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By JOHN W. JAKES

As top trouble-shooter for the K. & W. Railroad, Mark Rome's risky job was blazing the trail for the Westering iron. And God help the crew—either friends or enemies—who tried to stop him!

THE land had a familiar rolling quality about it. Rome rode westward in the early dawn, a big stocky man in his early thirties. He followed the movements of his horse easily, his clear gray eyes sweeping over the vast prairies. Those eyes carried the light of a quick mind, and his whole bearing told that he knew his mind could often aid him just as successfully as the pistol strapped to his right hip.

It was a sort of homecoming. He fol-

lowed the tracks, two bands of iron stretching ahead of him. The business was well taken care of, the morning air had a cool crispness, and he was in high spirits. The sun glinting from the pair of rails seemed to symbolize the future, alive with pleasant prospects.

His mood changed abruptly about noon when he rode into the end-of-track of the

Gashlin came crawling around the opposite side. . . .



Kansas & Western. The place had an air of idleness. Here and there, groups of the section hands sat near piles of ties, drinking coffee and playing cards. He heard no clang of hammers on spikes, no throaty curses of men sweating under the sun. Work had stopped. The rails no longer crept inevitably toward the Rockies.

As trouble-shooter it would be his job to iron out the difficulties slowing up the work. His mind moved rapidly over the possibilities as he dismounted and tied his horse to the platform rail of the office car. He took the steps two at a time and slammed the door behind him.

Ben Hamilton, the wiry white-haired head of the Kansas & Western, sat behind his desk, staring at Rome over the top of a cold coffee pot. His eyes were filled with red networks of sleeplessness. Rome waited for him to speak, sensing defeat in the slump of Hamilton's shoulders.

At last the older man sighed. He switched his gaze to the coffee pot and poured himself another cup. "Hello, Mark. You want some coffee? It's cold. . . ."

"No, thanks," Rome answered. He swung his leg across a chair before the desk, resting his arms on the back.

"You don't look very good, Ben," he said.

Hamilton laughed in a cracked tone and gulped some of the coffee. "I guess not, Mark. How's things in St. Louis?"

Rome gestured. "All cleared up. The hitch was coming from back East. We'll be getting rails and spikes to spare in a couple of days."

"Don't know as it'll do us much good," Hamilton commented sourly.

"Look, Ben, you might as well spill it. It's my job."

The older man sighed again, irritably. "All right, damn it. It's simple enough. We're stopped. We can't buy the right of way we need through three of the spreads. The owners won't sell. So we can't meet our contract. It'll mean an extra week if we

decide that we will bypass Warknife."

Rome sat up abruptly. "Warknife!" He hadn't realized they were that close.

"Yeah," Hamilton replied. "You know the town?"

Rome nodded. "I was born there. Lived there until I was eighteen, before I went East."

"That's great." Hamilton's tone was sarcastic. "You must have a lot of friends there. One hell of a lot of good that'll do us."

Friends . . . the word stung Rome. More than friends. Cathy Thompson. He remembered her, painfully. How much he had been in love with her, how many times they had ridden together, hunted together, laughed at the antics of the young calves together.

Rome knew then it wouldn't work. The cattle were in her blood. They were her life and her heritage. She could only see cattlemen, and no one else. For him there had been another call, from the East, from the world where the iron horse was beginning to stir its great wheels and bellow its smoke as it cut the continent in half. Since that morning, years ago, when he saw the locomotives standing on the wharf of St. Louis, the railroad had captured him.

ROME thought about each of the two dreams, sitting before Hamilton in the shadowy car as the older man stared at him tiredly. The iron horse . . . he had caught that excitement as a small boy and never lost it. Then Cathy, when he was older. The two couldn't live side by side, not then. The smokestack, the churning pistons, the wheels westward, the whistle scream . . . the railroad won. He left Warknife and Cathy and went East.

Now, he was here again. One dream had been fulfilled, but the other still left its empty ache within him.

"Why all the trouble?" he asked at last. "I thought our buyers had the land contracts sewn up."

"So did we!" Hamilton exclaimed. "Why, dammit, we were set to lay track all the way to the mountains, picking up the contracts as we went along."

"The buyers didn't get anything on paper?"

Hamilton shook his head. "They should have. That was where we slipped."

"Everybody slips once in a while," Rome told him. "We've got to correct the slip, that's all."

"Look," Hamilton said explosively. Rome realized the man's nerves were frayed to near the point of breaking. "We've been trying for the last four days. Somebody's stirred up the three ranchers . . . well, most of the town, in fact . . . and they're dead set against the railroad coming through. Or at least that's the way it stacks up."

"Any particular reason?"

"God knows. A lot of hogwash about too much too quick. I've got a pretty good idea who's behind it. An hombre named Bruce Gashlin. He's got his main office in Warknife." Hamilton grimaced. "Central Kansas Overland Company."

"Stages, eh?" Rome said.

"Yeah, we can't fight 'em, legally at least. It's all in folk's minds, the way it appears to me. Progress is comin' too fast. The coaches have worked for them well enough for a long time, so why change? A little fast talking here and there and we're blocked."

"You had any trouble?"

"Not much. Couple of the boys got in an argument at the Emporia and got cut up a little by the crowd, but that's all. Though I think this Gashlin's got it in him if he wants to make serious trouble for us. He's got one boy working for him named Yancey who looks like a real killer."

Rome picked a cigar out of the inlaid box on the top of the desk. He struck a match to it and inhaled the strong pungent smoke. "I've got a pretty good idea of what you want me to do."

"I thought you would."

"I'd like to know the names of the ranchers with the land we need for right-of-way."

Hamilton pulled out one of the desk drawers, shuffled through a sheaf of papers and pulled one out, laying it on the desk before him. He scanned it a moment. "Harry Drew, Giles McMaster and Job Thompson."

Once again the knife of memory and regret twisted through Rome's chest. Job Thompson . . . Cathy's father, big and powerful and rock-faced, with his voice like rich velvet thunder. When the children of the Warknife Congregation Sunday School thought of God, they thought of Job Thompson's voice.

And Cathy . . . thinking of seeing her again worried Rome. By now she must be married, he reasoned. Any number of young ranchers with small spreads near Warknife would have found her a fine wife. And a beautiful one at that.

Rome eased himself to his feet and looked straight at Hamilton, trying not to show his tangled, apprehensive emotions. "I'll ride in and see what I can do."

"You're a good talker, Mark, a damned good talker. Maybe you can get 'em to change their minds."

"I'll try."

Hamilton jabbed a warning finger at him. "Let me tell you something, Mark. I know you're never anxious to use that gun of yours, but I've met this Gashlin, and believe me, he's somebody to watch out for. He hates us. And Yancey's nothing but a paid killer. Gashlin's got a bunch of them working for him, but this Yancey's the worst. He hung around Dodge City for a long time, I hear."

"I'll watch out," Rome told him.

With a brief farewell to his boss, Rome left the office car and swung up into his saddle, moving at a brisk trot out through the end-of-track camp. It still lay quiet under the burning yellow eye of the noon sun. A harmonica lifted mournfully from somewhere beyond the cook car.

OUTSIDE the camp, Rome kicked his mount to a gallop. Warknife lay less than half a mile away. He felt ashamed that he had forgotten so much of the territory in the years he had been away.

Warknife itself had not changed greatly. The board fronts were still there, some with a new coat of paint, some still worn even more from the weather since he had lived there. He rode slowly through the main street, noticing the new druggist's shop, the new name posted over the livery stable. A hundred boyhood incidents flooded back, reminiscent of warm summer evenings near the stable, of the excitement of the first rolled cigarette, the first church meeting. His father, his mother . . . they were vague figures, tall sad-faced people broken by years of work in the general store business. A man named Hopeman now owned the store, he saw.

No one recognized him. He rode slowly through the main street. People hustled on the sidewalks doing after-dinner shopping. Cattlemen rode busily on various errands. The loungers on the front porch of the Emporia Saloon paid no attention to him. He saw The Reverend Paxton, who peered at him for a minute from the sidewalk. Rome stared at him impassively. Paxton's eyes took in the gun on his hip, the raw-boned body, the easy determined face. No expression of recognition appeared. Rome felt, somehow, lonely.

The Circle JT lay three miles on the other side of Warknife, to the northwest. Rome caught his breath angrily as he saw that the land would make a perfect right-of-way. Except for a deep cut in the midst of a stretch of uncleared timber which would have to be bridged, the construction would be relatively easy.

The yard of the ranch house lay deserted. Most of the hands, including Thompson himself, would be out on the range. Rome tied his horse and walked across the porch, conscious of the hollow loudness of his boots. He knocked almost cautiously.

Mrs. Thompson, a stout mild-mannered woman with a retiring manner, came to the door. She stared at him with the gaze she must have reserved for strangers, Rome thought. She made no attempt to recognize him for a moment. They had all forgotten. . . .

"Yes sir, good afternoon," she said, "what can—" She caught her breath abruptly. "Why, my goodness! Is it . . . Mark Rome? Is it?"

Rome grinned. "Yes, ma'am, it is."

Mrs. Thompson opened the front screen quickly. "Why, my heavens, boy, come in!" She ushered him into the parlor, a velvet musky place smelling of handmade lavender sachets and adorned with the customary motto, *God Bless Our Home*, on the wall. "Sit down, Mark," she said affably. "I'll call Cathy." She raised her voice. "Cathy, Cathy, come see who's here. . . ."

Rome turned his hat in his hands.

Cathy appeared in a moment from the kitchen. She stared at him, a slender woman with brown hair, frank brown eyes and a faintly sensuous mouth set in an oval face. She was still very good to look at, Mark thought.

"Mark Rome!" she said, smiling, and Rome felt the inner glow of warmth that always came from seeing that smile. She shook his hand with just a hint of warm pressure. He saw that she wore no wedding ring.

"When did you come back to Warknife?" she asked.

"Only today. I've been in St. Louis, doing some work for the railroad."

"Railroad?" Mrs. Thompson stiffened a bit.

"Yes, ma'am, the Kansas and Western."

Cathy laughed thinly. "It always was the railroad, wasn't it, Mark?"

"Yes, I guess it was. I came to see about the trouble over the right-of-way." The moment, he realized, was broken. The wall had been quickly erected and they were strangers again.

"Dad isn't going to sell, Mark," Cathy said evenly. "Bruce Gashlin's stages work well enough. You know that."

"I'd like to talk with Job, if I could," Mark said.

"You'll have to wait for him," Mrs. Thompson told him archly. "He'll be in about the middle of the afternoon. If you'll excuse me, I'm trying to put up some pickles in the kitchen and I guess they're just about ready. Sure was nice to see you again." Her smile carried no feeling.

He and Cathy talked for an hour or so, exchanging news of what they had both been doing in the intervening years. Cathy did not mention anything of marriage and Rome avoided the subject also. Then they talked of the East where Cathy had never been.

"Everything's too fast there," she said stiffly. "Always trying something crazy before it's proven."

"There are plenty of railroads in operation," Rome said with a trace of sharpness.

"Plenty of stage lines left, too, Mark. They'll never be wiped out, no matter what happens in the East. Dad doesn't like the East. He's been there."

The wall between them grew by the minute. At about three, Job Thompson rode in, older of course, but his voice still had that awesome quality of majesty. Rome exchanged a brief hello and stated his business.

Thompson thought for a moment. "All right, son. We'll see. We'll call a meeting at the church and you and Bruce Gashlin can talk it out in front of everybody. I'll make sure Drew and McMaster are there. You haven't got a chance, but we'll give you an opportunity of telling folks in town what you think, and you'll see how damned wrong you are! How's tonight?" he finished curtly.

"Tonight'll be fine."

He hated Job Thompson and respected him at the same time.

"Make it eight o'clock," the rancher told him.

With an even briefer good-by than he gave to Thompson, Rome left Cathy and the house and rode out of the Circle JT.

Lead-colored gray clouds were lowering in the north. Even the sky seemed unfriendly.

Well, he might be able to get something over at the meeting. He hoped so.

But even more, he realized that he and Ben Hamilton were entirely alone, strangers in a strange land. The iron horse had become an enemy to a way of life. People were slow to change. Sometimes they never did. And he was losing his contact with the one woman he had ever cared about. Not that there had been much chance of starting things over, anyway. . . .

As he rode slowly back toward Warknife, his eyes roamed to the grasslands. The stalks were dry and brown, sun-parched and tinder-brittle. The gray clouds might bring rain.

The grass, he reflected, was dangerous, like the situation in Warknife. Explosive. Waiting for trouble was a man called Gashlin, and another called Yancey from Dodge City. . . .

Rome actually felt thankful for the pistol on his hip.

CHAPTER TWO

A Meeting for Death

HE TIED his horse in front of the Emporia, walked up the steps, across the porch and in, aware of the complete indifference of the loungers. It wouldn't be long, though. Job Thompson had ridden out of the Circle JT a mile behind him. Rome watched from a distant rise. The word would spread fast.

Feeling the hunger in his belly, he made his way through the gaming tables, past the bar and up the stairs to the mezzanine. It wouldn't look good, he reasoned, to be seen

drinking straight whiskies at the bar when he was to present his point of view at the church that evening.

A tired waiter with pasted-down mustache, sauntered over and took his order for a steak, fried potatoes and beer. Rome leaned his elbows on the table tiredly and fixed himself a cigarette. He was just putting a match to it when someone at his elbow said, "May I sit down, Mr. Rome?"

Rome glanced up, blowing out the match. The stranger was tall, of medium build, finely dressed with a checked waistcoat. He was about Rome's age, hard-faced and ruddy, with sharp, cold blue eyes. He smiled at Rome, his lips curling faintly as if the whole world was a ridiculous spectacle that he could control at will. Rome catalogued him after a moment as a ruthless opportunist.

"Sure, sit down. You seem to know my name. I can't say the same."

"Gashlin, Bruce Gashlin."

News had traveled faster than he had expected. His eyes moved briefly to the head of the mezzanine stairs. A young kid in dirty denims and a sweat-stained shirt was watching him, grinning at him idiotically. Above the grin his eyes had the hardness of stone chips. A youngster, Rome thought, taking in the well-worn holsters and pistol butts. That would be Yancey. . . .

Gashlin fixed himself a cigarette with careless precision. "I guess you and I are going to be on opposite sides of the fence tonight," he said, as if it didn't matter in the least.

"I'm going to tell them why I think the railroad should come through, if that's what you mean."

"Your buyers didn't have much luck."

"That's what I'm for, Mr. Gashlin. In case the buyers don't have much luck."

Gashlin nodded. "You know, of course, what my business is."

Rome laughed shortly. "Yes, I know."

"I'm not going to give you any line about too much progress," Gashlin said evenly.

"That's for the people I deal with." He waved a hand at the thronging bar below with its lush nude mural, its rows of bottles, its noisy laughter. "Frankly, I've got a business to run. My business is essentially the same as that of the Kansas and Western . . . passengers and freight. It's a good business, and I've worked hard for it—though not always honestly, I'll admit. But I don't want to lose it."

Before Rome could reply, the waiter appeared with the food. When he left again, Rome stuck his fork into the steak and said, "I could figure all that for myself."

Gashlin shrugged. "I just wanted to let you know what you're up against. I'm not planning to lose the Central Kansas Overland."

Rome stared straight at him. Gashlin kept his eyes narrowed, not avoiding the other man's eyes. "If you can't do it honestly," Rome asked quietly, "then it'll be otherwise?"

Gashlin nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"I guess we don't have much more to say." Rome ate a piece of steak and swallowed some cold beer.

Gashlin made no attempt to move. "Now that the formalities are out of the way, I can get down to business," he said. "When I heard what Job Thompson planned for tonight, naturally I didn't like it. I'm prepared to offer you a thousand dollars for not appearing at the church this evening."

"You're wasting your time."

"Twelve hundred is the most I can pay. It's a lot, but it's worth it to me."

Rome pushed his plate away from him with irritation. "Look, Mr. Gashlin, let's get something straight. I want to see the railroad come through. It's not a matter of my business succeeding or failing—I think the railroad will be an improvement. I haven't got stock in the company, and I wouldn't give a healthy goddam if they fired me next week, so long as they lay their trace when and where they're supposed to. You understand me?"

Gashlin stood up abruptly, gesturing with one hand. "I'm afraid I do, Mr. Rome." The youngster sauntered up to the table and stood behind his employer, pushing at the brim of the hat sitting crookedly on his head. "Mr. Yancey, this is Mr. Rome. You might be seeing a lot of each other."

Yancey said nothing. He merely stared at Rome, grinning his foolish smile, with his eyes darting and angry and hard. Rome shivered inwardly. Yancey was the kind of gun-crazy kid who killed for the sport of it. He would be good for a man like Gashlin.

Anger at Gashlin, the proposed deal, and the whole situation stacked up against the railroad in Warknife mushroomed suddenly to the surface.

He jerked a thumb at Yancey. "Does your hired gunslinger say anything?"

"Once in a while," Gashlin replied. "He's quiet most of the time, except when he's sore."

"Then you can tell him I'll be watching for him when he thinks he's old enough to shoot a gun. I'll be ready."

Yancey's grin widened even more. Rome knew the youngster wanted to jerk out his gun and shoot him right there. His stomach went cold. He kept his hands rigid on the knife and fork, watching Yancey's fingers moving nervously.

Yancey spoke suddenly, a rough, grating whine. "A pleasure, Mr. Rome. Just anytime."

"Get the hell out of here, both of you," Rome said.

Gashlin didn't reply. He moved among the tables, down into the bar and out into the street with Yancey following behind him.

Rome ate the rest of his meal hastily and pushed back his chair.

The clock over the bar said fifteen to six.

HE BOUGHT some cigars at the bar and sat on the front porch of the Emporia for two hours, listening to the talk around him. He learned quite a bit in that time.

There were three main topics of discussion. The first two were almost tied in importance. One was what would be said at the debate at the church, the other was the prospect of rain for the already tinder-dry grasslands. The clouds still hovered ominously, frowning with darkness as night came on, but they gave no rain.

Rome couldn't tell whether the opinions of the loungers were accurate in what they said, since they didn't actually represent the influential elements in the town. But they at least knew what the others were talking about.

The third topic was the railroad in general. Most of them, Rome found, thought the railroad might be a pretty good thing. Maybe most of the people would be on his side after all, except McMaster and Drew and, of course, Job Thompson.

At quarter to eight when the lamps were beginning to glow butter-yellow against the twilight dark and the outlines of the buildings mellowed with the coming of fire-lit night, Rome made his way to the church. It was already packed to overflowing. He walked stiffly down the center aisle, looking straight ahead, conscious of the eyes on his back.

Gashlin and Yancey sat in the first pew. Rome sat in the one opposite them. At a couple of minutes after eight, Job Thompson walked up to the platform and told the people why the meeting had been called. He and Drew and McMaster controlled the right-of-way, but he wanted their opinion on the subject of the railroad. His voice rolled out, sonorously rich and powerful, capable of swaying them. But at least he was fair.

"Our first speaker, representing the railroad, will be one of Warknife's former residents, Mark Rome."

Mark made his way forward amid the curious, excited whisper of the audience. Many of them, when he turned to face them, peered like bright-eyed birds. Job Thompson, his wife and Cathy sat stern-faced in

the second pew behind Gashlin and Yancey. Behind them in turn were two more families. The Drews and the McMasters, Rome guessed.

He didn't like being the first to speak. Gashlin had a better chance for an effective climax. But he had to do the best he could. He cleared his throat and began to speak, clearly and with as much sincerity as he felt.

He told them of the railroad's more rapid transportation in more comfortable circumstances. He told them of the reduced fares possible on the Kansas & Western because of the larger turnover of freight and passengers. He told them that the railroads would eventually link up the country, whether Warknife liked it or not. That part had to be worded carefully, politely.

And then he told them of the direct shipping of cattle. No more long drives to railheads. No more hiring of extra hands to make the long torturous pilgrimage to cattle centers. Direct shipping. Direct shipping. *Direct shipping.* He hammered it home with quiet forceful tones and sat down as a faint ripple of enthusiasm stirred the audience. One rough-garbed cowman started to clap, realized the surroundings and stopped with a nervous cough.

Thompson introduced Bruce Gashlin more favorably, more glowingly. When the stage owner rose to speak, he smiled in an innocently boyish manner, working for audience support. And Rome thought, He'll get it, damn it, because he's the showman.

Gashlin's speech was very brief.

"Friends," he told them, "you know me, Bruce Gashlin. I run the Central Kansas Overland Company. I don't like the railroads, and you know it. They won't last. Things like this, fly-by-night ideas, don't stay around very long. The Central Kansas Overland has done all right working for you, shipping your goods, and I think you know that. As for direct cattle shipping, it would mean slashing the cattle industry in half. The drives are one of the most im-

portant parts of the industry, and without them, men who make their living from the range, ordinary hands like a lot of you have been, would be out of work a good part of the time."

He cleared his throat and smiled at them again. Then he made a pretense of thinking for a moment, and frowned.

"I don't like to say things like I'm going to say now, but I want you all to know, because it may help you to think this thing through. I can't tell you about the operating methods of the Kansas and Western, but I do know they're afraid of us. A couple of hours ago, Mr. Rome down there talked to me in the Emporia saloon."

His voice rose to a full, excited pitch. "Mr. Rome offered me five hundred dollars Kansas and Western money not to appear here tonight and talk to you! If you want proof, Mr. Yancey was there with me!"

Rome jumped up, forgetting where he was, and started angrily for the platform. Hands grabbed at him. "You're a liar!" he shouted. "You're a liar, Gashlin, and you know. . . ."

The meeting exploded into confusion.

People pushed out of the pews, milling, turning, whispering in a shocked manner. Gashlin moved easily toward a side door, with Yancey following. The youngster's eyes watched the crowd sharply, his hand hovering over his gun.

Job Thompson grabbed Rome's shoulder, thundering accusations. Rome tried to argue in return, unsuccessfully. Angry talk, hoarse and punctuated with curses, filled the church. Rome caught a glimpse of a frantic Reverend Paxton standing by the far wall in helpless frightened bewilderment at the sacrilege breaking loose.

Rome jerked away from Thompson. He wanted to find Bruce Gashlin, make him admit the lie. He had been warned. Dirty all the way. Every trick available, and a few more Gashlin was probably inventing. He shouldered his way through the crowd. Some of the women struck at him.

He bumped into Cathy Thompson near the door. She stared at him as if he were a mortal enemy.

He took hold of her arm. "Listen a minute, Cathy, I don't want you to think. . . ."

The crowd pushed him away from her, outward, down the steps of the church onto the plank sidewalk. Job Thompson was following close behind him, still shouting questions. The mob had turned, had become a mob in actuality, twisted by Gashlin's strategy.

The stage owner and his gunman stood on the edge of the crowd. Rome pushed toward them, fighting his way most of the time. Once he dropped his hand to his hip, making sure his pistol was loose and free.

Job Thompson caught up with him just as Rome moved up to the other two men.

From then on, it happened very quickly and no one but Rome and Gashlin and Yancey saw what went on. The crowd milled blindly, paying no attention to anything but the opinions of the next person. The four men on the edge of the crowd formed a tight, closed-in band with their gun hands protected from sight and discovery.

Gashlin's eyes widened. Rome felt a quick terrible sense of the opportunity being instantly seized. Gashlin elbowed Yancey and the youngster slapped his holster, bringing his gun up.

Rome twisted aside, dodging low and bringing out his own gun. He aimed it at Yancey's belly as the youngster pulled the trigger. Just as Rome fired, Gashlin slapped his gun barrel down and the bullet plowed into the dirt of the street. Yancey's gun roared at the same instant.

The tight group of men stood bunched together for a moment. A woman screamed, high and shrill and maddeningly frightening.

The noise of the crowd ebbed away into silence.

Yancey had already disappeared. Rome whirled, his gun still smoking.

Job Thompson was reeling unsteadily, half a foot behind Rome, eyes closed in pain, his hands clutching the gaping red hole in his belly. Mrs. Thompson and Cathy were pushing through the crowd, clawing their way forward while Mrs. Thompson screamed hysterically.

Like a hearty tree with its life flow cut, Job Thompson fell forward and smashed face down into the street. A halo of dust rose up around his head when it struck the ground.

Rome turned on Gashlin, bringing the gun up again, cursing.

Gashlin's finger whipped out accusingly at Rome.

"Here's your man!" he shouted. "I saw him do it! They had an argument! Job didn't even draw! I saw it all!"

Mark shoved the gun at Gashlin. A hand jerked it from his fingers. An angry thunder rose around him in the throats of the crowd and Gashlin backed cautiously away.

Rome whirled once more, realizing now what had happened. There was no place to run. They were all around him. The lamp-lit street echoed with their shouts of vengeance. He was too late.

The mob closed in. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Hangtree Fugitive

HE KNEW that fighting them was useless. They swarmed at him, raining blows on his face and shoulders. He dodged, uselessly. Their anger was stirred and he heard it rising to a fever pitch around him. The men shouldered through the crowd, clustering close to him and their angry talk grew louder. Finally one hoarse voice grated out above the rest, and Rome knew what was coming.

"Lynch him!" the voice roared. "Lynch him!"

Others repeated the cry. Almost miraculously the rope appeared and eager

hands darted over it, twisting, coiling, fashioning the death noose. The women crowded on the church steps, watching coldly. Rome had seen a few lynchings in his time, but now he was caught up in the blood-crazy spell of one. The whole mob had suddenly become drunk with hatred.

Cathy stood in the middle of the women, stiff and haughty. She had pulled herself up to her full height and Rome caught a glimpse of her looking like an avenging goddess. Someone clubbed him on the back of the neck, and his knees buckled.

The next thing he knew he was being lifted and set in the saddle. His head spun, full of flashing colors and painful ringing noises. He almost ceased to think. The steady dull pounding of pain wiped even his fear away.

A voice shouted something about the livery stable, and hands seized the reins of the horse. The mob began to move, sluggishly at first, then faster, racing down the street. The horse jerked unevenly under him and Rome held on tightly to keep from falling. The lamp-lit windows blurred by.

A couple of torches were lit and passed from hand to hand. Rome wondered dully how all this could have happened so rapidly. But the fury had burned, caught and spread. . . . Job Thompson was a respected man. Rome could not see Bruce Gashlin anywhere in the crowd.

The trees before the livery stable moved their leaves with soft whispers among the shadows. A pungent smell of animals and straw filled the air. Somehow, the impressions around Rome became clear. All except the mass of white faces glaring up in an iron circle all around him. The women had stayed behind, he saw. No, he was wrong. Cathy watched from the fringe of the crowd.

Other hands pulled him down, started to slip the rope around his neck. Rome saw that one of the men with the rope wore a deputy's badge. He wondered what the sheriff was doing.

The thunder of the shotgun roared through the darkness, lighting the area with a burst of fire. The leaves stirred with faint poppings as the lead blasted through them.

The mob stopped.

Like a single organism, its voice died. Eyes groped frantically toward the shadows. The rope fell to the ground. Rome peered at the shapes in the darkness, vaguely outlined in the torch glow. He heard the familiar voice.

"All right, get away from him, all of you!"

Ben Hamilton! My God, it was Ben! Rome almost shouted his name aloud.

Hamilton sat atop his horse, shotgun leveled at the mob. Behind him were other riders, men from the camp, similarly armed. Their gun barrels shone a faint dull blue in the starlight.

"The next blast," Hamilton said quietly, "may get some of you."

The mob stirred, whispering. No one reached for his gun.

"Open a way there!" Hamilton ordered. "Mark, are you all right?"

"Yes," Rome called back.

"Can you ride out by yourself? Do you need help?"

"I can handle the horse," Rome said quickly.

The men had not moved. Hamilton's face, now craggy and determined, was dimly outlined in the orange fire from the torches. "Let him through!" he snarled. The shotgun roared again, close over the heads of the men. A pinched-face puncher squealed in fear, and immediately the crowd parted.

Rome kicked his horse through the aisle. Hamilton and the railroad men wheeled their mounts and they pounded down the alley behind the stable in the darkness. The voices lifted again with a muffled tone of anger but they sounded dim and confused above the rataplan of the horses' hoofs.

The band of men rode out of Warknife back to the end-of-track without a word be-

tween them. Rome hung on tightly, letting the horse have its head and follow the others. He felt strength slowly re-entering his body and he began to think clearly again.

At the camp, Hamilton posted guards all around, and then he and Rome went up into the office car. Hamilton pulled the green blinds and touched a match to the lamp. His eyes bit into Rome, worried and uneasy.

"This is pretty damned serious, Mark," he said quietly.

"Goddam it, you don't have to tell me that! What I want to know is how you got there. I was almost stretched out, Ben. I had the feeling I was going to be dead. I've never felt like that, so damned sure. It's not pleasant."

"Some of the boys rode into town this afternoon. They were drinking at the Emporia and heard about the meeting. I was afraid there might be trouble. We rode in just as the meeting was breaking up. We heard the shooting, and it was damned clear that a necktie party was being organized, with you in the middle. I'd like to hear about it."

"There's quite a bit," Rome said shortly.

"Well, make it quick. They'll be out here before long. I've got the men ready to signal. They won't be able to touch us . . . they'll be afraid to, because lynchings aren't legal. But with you it'll be a different story. They're after you now, Mark."

Rome laughed, sharp and hard. "A price on my head. . . ." Rapidly he outlined what had happened since their talk at noon. When he finished, Hamilton looked even more dismayed.

"God, Mark, this looks awful bad. You didn't try to buy off Gashlin, did you?"

"Listen, Ben, don't you know me better. . . ."

"All right, skip it! Don't get sore. You've got to figure out what and where you're going now. And on top of that, we've still got a contract to meet!" He

shoved a hand through his white hair, his eyes were like tiny glittering pinpoints in the yellow glow of the lamps.

TO ROME, the interior of the car with its green blinds and shadowed corners seemed secure and untroubled. The feeling was broken by the shattering sound of a rifle. Hamilton leaped to his feet, knocking over the chair.

"They're coming, Mark. Get out of here, fast! Ride back when things look clear and we'll see what's happened by then. . . ."

Rome already had the door open. He jumped off the steps, swung up on his horse and kicked it savagely. From the opposite side of the camp came the sounds of many mounts. The sound of his horse's hoofs would be muffled in all the noise of the men from Warknife.

He headed away from the camp, to the north, and circled back wide, riding across the dark prairie toward the town. The wind fanning his face was cool and invigorating. He began to organize his thoughts as he rode.

Gashlin, he figured, would be with the Warknife men. It was a chance he had to take. Yancey would be undercover, probably holed up in a room at one of the town's boarding houses. That left Rome opportunity enough.

He didn't exactly know what he was looking for. He only held the blind hope that perhaps he could find something to untangle the web of treachery and death gathering around him. Hamilton and the other railroaders were helpless now. He was a free agent, with a price on his head.

He realized with a jolt that he was an outlaw. The realization struck home with biting force and he rode on under the cloud-filled sky, feeling suddenly cut off and alone. The moon came out from under a black veil of clouds, shining down like a bloated pale face. The air had suddenly become very cold.

Warknife lay deserted now. Rome kept

to the back alleys. Most of the lamps in the houses were out, the people in bed. The hoofs of his horse made almost imperceptible thudding noises in the dirt.

He dismounted back of the main yard of the Central Kansas Overland Company. The bodies of the coaches loomed weird and skeleton-like against the moon as Rome crept silently among them toward the main office building. No guard seemed posted anywhere.

Rome eased out his pistol, slipping into a patch of shadow. He tried the door. It was locked. Moving to the right, he began a systematic check of the windows. Finally he found one open in the rear.

He crawled over the sill into a small storeroom piled high with blank invoices and shipping forms. The door to this room was locked. Conscious of the creak of the floorboards, he smashed twice at the lock with his gun butt. Then he listened. He heard nothing but a few faint shouts from the street. Drunks, probably, he thought. The lock hung broken, and he stepped out into the main office.

Across it, behind a gold-lettered door, stood Bruce Gashlin's office. In there, Rome reasoned, might be something . . . anything that could help him expose Gashlin for what he was. Cautiously he eased the door open and started a methodical rifling of the desk.

One of the bottom drawers was locked. He tugged at the handle, hearing the lock protest, and felt a quick burst of satisfaction. There was no safe in the office. Gashlin would be too sure of himself for that, too much in the favor of others, too much the ideal businessman. A locked drawer would suffice.

Rome snaked a letter opener from the top of the desk and thrust it into the slit of the drawer top. He worked it back and forth a few moments and cursed when he felt it snap in two. He found a second one with a heavy ivory handle near where the first had been, and he finally managed to crack the lock and pull out the drawer.

Three papers lay in the drawer. Rome hesitated, listening again. The drunken shouts had drawn closer, but they were still thick and carefree. Rome crouched under the desk and struck a match, reading the first paper.

The words written there were brief.

Received of Bruce Gashlin, 1500 dollars for services. Signed,

Job Thompson.

The other two, for seven and nine hundred respectively, were signed by Harry Drew and Giles McMaster. Rome snuffed out the match, his brain working rapidly to catch the meanings of what he had read.

Gashlin had plenty of money. Enough money to . . . to pay the ranchers not to sell the right-of-way. Pay them to maintain his business. More money than the railroad could offer for the small stretch of land. The Kansas & Western was not yet that big a firm, running things on a carefully controlled financial budget. Gashlin had the capital to carry off deals like this. . . .

And that meant Thompson, McMaster and Drew knew what kind of a man Gashlin was. They knew, for instance, that he would buy people off to get what he wanted, that it wasn't strictly a matter of being opposed to progress. The three of them had been in on the scheme and the rest of the people in the town were the only ones unaware of what was happening.

"Damn!" Rome said under his breath. The church meeting, then, had been a farce, a show staged to keep the townspeople quiet. They could have wielded a lot of weight, and now they were against the railroad to a man. Thompson's wrath at Gashlin's lie concerning the attempt on Rome's part to bribe him must have been an act, and that same anger provided a setting for his murder. Thompson, evidently, was expendable from Gashlin's point of view.

There was one man who might be able to blow things open, if Rome could get to him in the right way.

Stuffing the papers in his coat pocket, he straightened suddenly. One of the drunken voices was coming from the front porch of the office. A key rattled in the lock and the door swung open.

Rome crouched in the shadows. The watchman's lantern swayed in one hand, and a bottle hung slackly from the other. He stumbled against the outer office rail, swearing thickly. Rome started to move toward the storeroom through the open door of Gashlin's office.

The watchman turned, setting down his lantern. "Who is it?" he shouted. "Who in hell. . . ." He coughed and reached for his gun.

Rome moved faster than he thought possible. He clubbed the man's gun away and kicked him backward with his knee. He had learned the lesson of being outside the law very quickly.

The watchman staggered, his eyes wild and fiery in the smoky haze from the lantern. He jerked a knife from his pocket and came lumbering at Rome. "What the hell you doing in here?" he mumbled dully, over and over.

Rome tensed himself and swung out, striking the drunken man across the temple with his gun barrel. The knife clattered to the floor, striking the wood blade first. A faint whine filled the air, and then the watchman dropped, a dark splotchy bruise widening on his skin.

He wasn't dead. Rome made sure of that. Quickly he blew out the lantern. As he stood in the darkness listening to the watchman's wet irregular breathing, a new terror twisted up the pit of his stomach, only dimly sensed before.

He was bound to the railroad now more than ever, even though in another way he was cut off from it. He was bound to them not merely because he worked for them. No, it wasn't that simple. If the railroad went through, it meant that Gashlin would be out of business and there was a good chance that he would be cleared. If the rail-

road did not go through, he would eventually be a dead man, swinging in a noose.

The thought was ironic. He laughed softly. He had to put the Kansas & Western through. Not with actual rails and ties, not with sweating labor in the sun, but with his strength and his gun and his mind. A new way to drive the iron west. . . .

He stopped laughing then. The part about the noose became bitingly clear. He remembered how close he had come, how he had felt death so near to him.

He went out through the storeroom window, the papers in his coat, and out to the back of the yard. His horse waited quietly in the shadow thrown by the coaches with their angular shapes sticking up against the swollen white moon like the fingers of a skeleton.

CHAPTER FOUR

Confession

YANCEY. . . . The answer lay with the grinning death-crazed youngster.

At least, Rome thought, the first step lay there. He had to clear himself and thereby clear the railroad. And now with the moon out and night lying on the town, he had the opportunity. He knew very little about Yancey and yet he knew a great deal. Enough, perhaps, to give him the edge he needed.

Rome rode leisurely through the shadowed streets. They wouldn't be searching for him now, not here, at this hour. His horse moved quietly between the rows of houses while he looked to the right and left until he found what he wanted.

The first boarding house, run by an Irishman named Harrigan, revealed nothing. The irate, red-eyed landlord, clutching at the door frame to keep himself from falling asleep, told him that nobody named Yancey lived there. The door slammed abruptly in Rome's face. He moved back to the street, mounted again and rode on.

The second boarding house stood in a square by itself on the dusty street directly to the rear of the Emporia. Rome heard the jingling rhythms of the player piano still babbling out into the night, and occasional bursts of laughter. He tied his horse at the sagging gate and walked as quietly as he could onto the run-down squeaking boards of the porch.

He knocked three times before a landlady appeared, carrying a tall lamp, her hair put up in papers, her thick face mottled and her breath reeking of alcohol. She squinted at him in the dim ruddy glow. Rome felt safe. She was full of too much rotgut ever to recognize him even if she had been at the church. And judging from her appearance, the chances were she hadn't.

"What the hell's the idea of waking a lady at this time of night?" she growled, pulling her wrapper closer. The liquor fumes clouded around Rome's head when she spoke.

"I'm looking for a man named Yancey. Does he live here?"

"Sure he does. Cole Yancey. Up on the second floor. First door, to the left of the stairs."

He moved by her into the hall. She slammed the door and continued to babble drunkenly about being awakened, standing in a pool of light at the bottom of the stairs. She was still complaining when he turned the corner at the head of the stairs.

He halted at the first door, standing in the darkness, listening. Beyond the thin panel he heard loud nervous snoring. He eased his gun from its holster and shoved the barrel up near the lock. Then he rapped on the door.

He kept knocking until the snoring stopped. Yancey's voice mumbled incoherently and footsteps padded to the door. Rome heard the noise of a hammer going back. Even if he was still groggy from sleep, Rome thought, he couldn't get out of the habit. But his reaction would be slow . . . *it had to be. . .*

"Yeah?" Yancey called. "Who is it?"

"Gashlin sent me over," Rome whispered.

"What about?"

"About you and Job Thompson, that's what. Now open up, will you?" He tried to sound angry and in a hurry at the same time.

Rome's heart slugged out a steady drumming rhythm within his chest. The key rattled in the lock and a tiny bit of light appeared as Yancey pulled the door open.

Rome shoved the barrel of his gun against the man's stomach.

"Let go of your gun!" he whispered. "*Now!*"

Yancey's face lost its idiotic grin. His chips of eyes were dull, but they flared with the sudden awareness that he was caught. He tried to step backward, but Rome jammed the metal barrel deeper into his flesh, gouging it. "Drop it on the floor!" he ordered.

Yancey giggled and coughed, still not awake. He eased the hammer carefully into place. The gun clattered to the board floor and Rome stepped quickly into the room, shutting the door. Yancey, standing with bare feet on the rough flooring, his underwear draped over his bony frame, looked like a helpless and terribly frightened boy.

He didn't have a gun any more. That was what Rome counted on. Without his gun he was nothing but a youngster. Rome scooped up the weapon and thrust it into his belt. Now, Yancey couldn't fight back. When he lost his gun, nothing remained. He waited submissively, terror in his eyes, staring at the glinting blue death in Rome's hand.

"What do you want from me, Mr. Rome?" he croaked. "Listen, I only work for Gashlin. . . ."

Rome moved across to the bed and sat down. A smell of rotting garbage, sour and damp, filtered into the rude bedroom, through the open window, and a piano whined its mechanical melodies.

"I know you work for him," Rome said. "That's why I want to know a few other things. And you'd better answer me. Because you haven't got a gun, and if you don't answer me, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

Yancey trembled. Rome felt a surge of triumph. He had been right. Yancey was like so many of them, masters of the situation only with a gun. Now the youngster was scared, scared of the cold deadly muzzle eye poking right at him. He was seeing the fire of the explosion, seeing the smoke rising before the bullet slammed into him, when he said, "Ask your questions."

"Did you know you were going to shoot Thompson before the meeting tonight?"

Yancey shook his head doggedly. "No, Mr. Rome." He emphasized the *mister*. "Gashlin give me the nod, so I knew it was okay. I understand when he gives me the nod. People were packed so tight, nobody could have seen. I just had a few drinks after that and came back here."

Suddenly a new thought wrote itself across his face. "Say, they were supposed to hang you. I saw 'em myself...."

Anger filled Rome and he rose to his feet. His voice grew loud and furious. "You cheap punk, they didn't hang me. I'm good and alive, and I've got half a mind to kill you right now. Remember in the Emporia? You said it would be a pleasure. Well, here I am." He glared at the youngster.

"Yeah," Yancey mumbled faintly.

"No good without a gun, are you?"

Rome couldn't resist the remark.

"No, I ain't, Mr. Rome."

"You're damned quick with the answers, aren't you, you son?" Rome felt more hatefull by the minute. This crazy kid had put the murderer brand on him as calmly as he had a few drinks afterward. Rome finally got control of himself. His breathing came loudly.

"All right," he said, "I want you to do something."

"Sure, anything."

"You got some paper and a pen?"

Yancey pointed to the dresser. "In there. Belongs to the landlady."

ROME moved to the buerau and pulled open the drawer. Underneath a pile of half-clean work shirts were a few yellow sheets of writing paper, a metal-tipped pen and a glass bottle a third full of ink. He set them, one by one, on top of the table in the center of the room. Then he caught the chair with his boot tip and jerked it forward. "Sit down."

Yancey sat down, fidgeting with his underwear.

"You're going to write what I tell you. Pick up the pen. You can write, can't you?"

"Yeah, I went to school in Indiana when I was a kid."

"Don't waste time. Write this. *I, Cole Yancey....*" The pen scratched laboriously. Yancey hunched over the table, peering at what he was writing.

"...killed Job Thompson outside of church this evening, according to the orders of my boss, Bruce...."

"Not so fast, will you?" Yancey whined.

"Shut up and keep writing. *Bruce Gashlin...got that?*"

Yancey nodded.

"Date it and sign your name."

Yancey obeyed and pushed the paper away from him. Rome picked it up, scanned it briefly and put it down again. "Not just the initials," he said harshly. "I want your whole name."

"I always use my...." Yancey began. He looked once more at the gun and wrote out his full name hastily.

Rome was reaching for the paper again, feeling satisfied, when the door opened abruptly. Bruce Gashlin stood there, his clothes sweat-stained and dirty from hard riding, his fingers curled around the door-knob. His husky face remained calm but his blue eyes narrowed just a bit. He seemed undisturbed at seeing Rome.

"Well!" He laughed gently. "Mr. Rome, I didn't expect you." He noticed the gun immediately, closing the door and stepping into the room. Rome's backbone tingled. A new factor had entered the situation. Another mind was working now.

It was now no longer Rome against Yancey's gun.

Rome indicated the paper on the table. "I've got a nice confession from Mr. Yancey about Job Thompson's murder. It implicates you."

The tiny superior smile edged Gashlin's mouth. His fingers dipped into the pocket of his checked waistcoat and he pulled out a cigar. "Unfortunately we couldn't do a thing at the railroad camp, since you'd already gone. Anyway, your boss Hamilton had plenty of men with rifles. I just wanted to have a talk with Cole here. I didn't think you'd be on the scene."

"I'm leaving," Rome told him. "I think the sheriff'll be looking for you in a little while. I'll be with him. I want it to be legal."

"The paper won't stand up in court," Gashlin argued. His fingers dipped down into the waistcoat again. Rome watched him carefully. Gashlin's tone, controlled as it was, still revealed more than a trace of anxiety. The paper could finish him, and he knew it.

"I'll take my chances...." Rome began. "And get your hands up where they belong."

Gashlin shrugged. "I only want to light my cigar."

The fingers reappeared, holding a pepper-pot derringer.

Rome tried to move fast. He swung the pistol toward Gashlin, but the other man slid the tiny gun across the table. "All right, Yancey," he breathed. The youngster's eyes flared wildly as the derringer slid into his lap. He fumbled for it.

Rome swung his gun back again, the finger whitening on the trigger. He had no time now . . . no time. Yancey was back

in power, his young eyes full of kill-lust as he brought the derringer up over the edge of the table. Gashlin was smiling, and Yancey's face broke into its idiot grin.

He had no time...no time now....

A ragged burst of piano music floated through the window, cut off abruptly the hollow thunder of Rome's gun exploding three times. Yancey dropped the derringer onto the table with a loud clack. He sat back, his eyes bulging, while the blood poured out of the hole Rome had blown in his neck. Slowly, he toppled to the floor.

Rome whirled. The last fragments of the confession were curling into black ash. Gashlin tossed the match onto the table. "Do you want to kill me, too, Mr. Rome?" he said quietly.

From the first floor, the landlady began to shout drunkenly. Rome cursed and ran for the door. He did want to kill Gashlin, kill him where he stood, but he had to get away. The foundation had fallen, the bottom had tumbled out, and the hole had grown death-deep. He was caught now, more than ever before.

He crashed against the landlady coming up the stairs, knocking the lamp out of her hand. There was a rattle of glass, a leaping-up of flame and she screamed again. He bolted through the door and jerked himself up on his mount, digging his heels in savagely. He thundered away through the darkened streets, out toward the end-of-track. Behind him, hoarse shouting filled the night air. The moon had vanished and the world lay dark as he rode.

The gun, the law of the gun, his brain sang. You couldn't outwit it, you couldn't beat it. In the end, it trapped you, you returned to it and it destroyed you. The only means to a given end, bringing devastation as it worked. His thoughts were confused, but he realized that his hope of outwitting Gashlin had been sliced to bits.

Now he had actually killed a man. The hoofbeats echoed it. *Killed a man, killed a man, killed a man....* The wind screaming

in his ears sang it to him. Nothing remained but force, dull animal force. He knew it was wrong, but the other way had failed.

The end-of-track camp lay in darkness. The guards challenged him and he shouted his name to them as he rode past. He ran up the steps of the office car, pushed the door open and faced Ben Hamilton, his heart beating furiously, his mind tangled and whirling.

"I killed Yancey," Rome choked. "I shot him, I killed him, I couldn't help it...."

His nerves broke to pieces inside of him and he sank onto the chair before Hamilton's desk. He cradled his head on his arms, letting the dry sobs shake him, letting the strained emotions break loose.

He was no gunslinger. He was no fast draw man. He worked for the railroad. He had a job. But they were killers. No business for them. Killing. Ruthless. He worked for the railroad... my God... the railroad... the wheels... round and round... killed a man... and round... killed a man and round and round... *killed, killed, killed*....

It took Ben Hamilton nearly an hour to quiet him down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Drive the Iron West!

WHEN Rome began to talk coherently once more, Hamilton drew the story from him. Rome felt a tiny sense of calm slowly begin to wash over him and the familiar coach interior with its warm closed-in atmosphere of protection soothed his jangled nerves.

"I'm just not the man to handle a gun like that," he said wearily at last. "I thought times were changing. I thought you could work things out in other ways."

"Too much time back East," Hamilton grumbled. "You've been used to other things, but the country out here's slow to change. You ought to know that."

"I'm a killer," Rome said softly.

Hamilton jabbed a finger at him. "The important thing is to get out of sight. I think we'd better hide you out here. We'll fix a place in one of the box cars. Right now we've got to get the Kansas and Western rolling through Warknife, on top of everything else."

Rome nodded. "Maybe these'll help." He fished the three papers from Gashlin's office out of his pocket and shoved them across the desk, explaining briefly what they were and how he had gotten them.

Hamilton read them, and laughed aloud.

"By God, Mark, this may be our break." He got to his feet quickly. "Come on, let's get you under cover. They may be looking for you after a while."

But no riders came to the end-of-track for Mark Rome.

It was cold in the box car, cold and dark. He slept huddled among some old blankets Hamilton had found around the camp. The first night, he rested fitfully, lying awake most of the time listening for the drum of hoofs in the distance. The night air remained quiet.

When dawn gashed the east with gray streaks, he realized that they wouldn't be coming. Yancey wasn't that important. The Job Thompson killing still stood and they would be hunting for him on that count. Gashlin probably figured that Yancey could be forgotten. There were a hundred others like him to be bought anywhere in the West.

Toward noon, while Rome hunched in the box car playing solitaire with a worn-out deck of cards one of the Polish section hands brought him, he heard the sound of horses in the silent camp. He peered out through the door of the car, slid it open a fraction of an inch, and saw a big man, evidently the sheriff, with a party of horsemen from Warknife drawn up before the office car. They were conferring with Hamilton. After a while, they rode out again, back toward the town.

Hamilton made his way to the box car

across the sprawling camp. "Looking for you," he reported. "About Thompson, still. Told them you'd gone, lit out of here last night after we saved you from stretching the rope. They don't seem to feel too bad about it. They've quieted down and the sheriff doesn't like lynchings. They figure somebody'll catch up with you."

"What now?" Rome said quietly. He gestured at the box car interior. "Damn it, Ben, do I have to stay here when I ought to be out clearing myself?"

"Can you do it?" Hamilton's eyes bored into him.

"You know I can't. Gashlin's free and I've got nothing on him."

Hamilton smiled thinly. "Nothing but those papers. They aren't incriminating, but they may help."

"You got an idea?"

"Yeah," Hamilton said. "Right now, you wait." Without another word, he stalked back across the camp. After cookie brought him his noon meal, Rome saw Hamilton ride out in the direction of Warknife.

Wait. . . .

The hours stretched on, dull, soundless, colorless, full only of the nagging fear about which he could do absolutely nothing. He was trapped, coldly and mercilessly, and he had no alternative but to wait, as Hamilton had said. Even then, he didn't have an idea in the world of how to clear himself. Maybe he would have to ride out permanently. With a sick feeling he realized that he might always be a hunted man. Something had to break. . . .

Ben Hamilton returned just before sundown, riding directly to Rome's car. He was grinning as he swung up, passing Rome a cigar. "This is it, boy!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet we'll be laying track in sight of two days!"

"What happened?"

"I took those papers to the sheriff."

"What for? They won't put anybody in jail."

"No, they won't. The sheriff himself told

me he can't touch any of the ranchers or Gashlin. The papers are strictly legal, the deal's above board. But he didn't like the idea of the ranchers double-dealing Warknife like that. A lot of people really do want the railroad. The word's going to spread. . . ."

It spread rapidly, and Rome heard it second-hand from the men who came back after an evening in town. It was harsh and angry news, and the town was rising on its haunches, wondering, voicing questions, hurling accusations.

The power of people . . . as they had surged together, fused their individual units into one mass of hatred against Rome, now they were uniting against the trickery going on around them. They began to wonder about Gashlin's statement of Rome's attempted bribery.

"Everybody knows about the papers," one of the men said. "Course, with Job Thompson dead, ain't much talk about him. But the others are getting laid low. The small ranchers didn't have any idea those three and Gashlin was keeping their chances of shipping that beef by rail from working out. . . ."

The voices rose, became angrier, more firm. The whispers carried back to the dark lonely box car where Mark Rome waited.

"Gashlin's an unpopular man by about five hundred per cent. He's strictly on the up and up, but people don't like being shoved around because of him . . . they're getting wind of the stink. . . ."

More and more it grew. Rome felt satisfied in a small way. Maybe the rails would stretch out. Maybe the Kansas & Western would roll. Only Job Thompson's killing remained bloody on his hands.

THREE mornings after Hamilton took the papers to Warknife, more riders came to the camp. When they had gone, Hamilton did not appear, so Rome made his way to the office car. Hamilton was busy at the desk when he entered.

He glanced up. "Damn it, Mark, you're not supposed to be roaming around. Somebody might ride in any time."

"I just wanted to find out what those men were doing here."

Hamilton grinned tiredly. "The whole town's busted wide open. Drew and McMaster gave back the money Gashlin paid them and tore up the papers. Cathy Thompson's going to do the same. She didn't have any idea, it appears, that old Job was up to crooked bribery deals like that on the side."

"That means something...." Rome began.

"You're damned right it means something. Gashlin's sore as hell." Hamilton fingered the green metal cash box on top of the desk. "But I paid for the right of way through all three spreads. Public opinion got too strong. Why, those three families, I hear, were almost social outcasts. Like they had leprosy or something.

Couldn't afford that in a town like War-knife. We're going through, starting now."

Somehow it made Mark feel better. The wheels were turning again. The air took on an electric glow. New life was being pumped into the Kansas & Western. He glanced out of the window and saw a new activity, a new stirring. Men bustled about busily. Track foremen were assembling their crews, flatcars were loading.

"I think maybe we've got this thing licked," Hamilton said at last.

"I wouldn't count on it."

"What?"

"Gashlin's going to try to stop us. And this time it's not going to be with deals. He's going to use guns and dirty tactics. We've got to expect it."

Hamilton studied him shrewdly. "We'll be ready for it. And I think it may be a good thing. It scares the hell out of me, Mark, because we're cutting the edge of our time pretty thin as it is right now. But



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maybe we can get him out in the open once and for all."

Rome nodded. "I'll wait. If he hits us, we'll have our chance. I swear to you, Ben, somehow I'll get that Thompson thing cleared up."

"The situation's backwards now, Mark. Gashlin's out, we're in. He'll fight for sure. But we're in."

"All except me," Rome said quietly.

"Your chance'll come."

Rome nodded. "Right now, I want to work."

"All right. We're going to hit this thing and hit it hard. Day and night. You'll work nights."

"I want to be out on the track. I want to help put those rails down myself, Ben."

"Good enough. Only don't expect to do that all the time. You won't have to worry much about hiding out at night, so I'll put you on call. We may need extras in everything, foremen, engineers. We'll be working on a rough schedule."

"Suits me."

Hamilton slapped him on the shoulder. "Get back to your damned box car and wait till dark. Then you can get to work."

Mark thought of Gashlin all afternoon, wondering how and when the strike would come. When he got hold of him... well... he thought about that a lot. And the bitterness feeding in him, gnawing at his mind, changed him subtly for a time. All he wanted was Gashlin before him and a gun in his hand. He was committed now. The trail had been marked out clearly.

Bruce Gashlin... the ruddy, faintly smiling face danced before his eyes in the gloom of the box car. He wondered if he would be strong enough to keep from murdering Gashlin, shooting him dead the first time he laid eyes on him, the first time he was unprotected.

by the small switch engines. Hoarse shouting echoed through the camp. Smoke wisped in the sky, and from the west came the clang of hammers.

At four o'clock the rain came smashing down from the bloated gray clouds. At six, in the gloom, Rome was swinging a hammer, driving in spikes. Behind him the switch engine bored a yellow cone of light through the murk, wreathing the working men in a ghostly aura.

The rain kept coming down, soaking into the burnt ground. They drove themselves, working twenty-four hours a day. Rome's muscles screamed aloud when the dawn came, but he kept working. His clothes were never dry. His head swam dizzily, and when he slept, he swung a hammer in his feverish dreams.

He knew he was getting sicker every hour, but he didn't care.

The Kansas & Western was going through.

They drove the rails across Drew's spread, then McMaster's, then through Warknife. Rome stayed out of sight the night they laid track through the town. Next day they were beyond the western outskirts and he was eager to work again. He argued with Hamilton and finally won, working through the day too, stopping only about seven hours for sleep when he got too tired to work any more.

They cut the timber and threw up the trestle over the cut on Thompson's spread. Once, at night, working under the eye of the locomotive behind them, Rome saw Cathy Thompson on horseback with Hamilton, watching the work. He kept his head down as he slammed another spike home. Cathy was forgotten. Even Gashlin had been wiped from his mind temporarily. The world consisted of the rails and the ties and the spikes and the watching yellow eye marking their progress through the rainy darkness.

Men began to drop. The ones remaining worked harder than ever. The dispensary

NOISE filled the camp. Whistles shrilled and the flatcars began to move out up the line about a quarter of a mile, pulled

in the rear of the office car was open all hours, and the supplies of medicine dwindled. The men were sick, but a restless energy drove them on. Hamilton was among them often, swinging a hammer, cursing, as wet and as sick and as tired as they were. But, like them, he was proud of what they were doing and it kept them going.

Nine days after they started work they were back on schedule and almost to the boundary of Job Thompson's ranch. Rome had been back to the main camp, lying east of the recently constructed trestle over the cut, trying to find some warmer clothes. The air had grown colder, turning the ground to chilly churning mud.

Rome stood in the mess tent, downing a cup of hot rancid coffee when one of the foremen came in. "Hey, Rome," he yelled, "they're short of iron up ahead! We're rigging a couple of flatcars full of stuff. Can you take her up?"

Rome nodded and finished his coffee. He made his way through the rain toward the snorting switch engine. "Steam's up," the foreman called as Rome swung up into the cab.

He edged the throttle back, his hands moving with skill over the controls. The keen railroad man's sense of precision, his adept handling of the snuffing iron locomotive, born from instinct and practice, took hold, and he watched the track up ahead.

The wheels turned, hissing, clacking, rattling off their song of triumph. They weren't beaten. They were rolling west again. They were going through! Hallelujah! He felt wildly elated, even though the fever and the dampness dulled his senses.

He wasn't making over eight miles an hour. But that was all right. The trestle would be coming up soon, and it wasn't far after that. Too many men were still working along the roadbed to take chances. Just being in the cab, feeling the engine under his hands, made him feel immeasurably

better. He thought suddenly of Cathy and wished, crazily, that she were with him.

The rain slanted down through the headlight, cold and forbidding. Rome didn't care about the rain any more. He jerked the pull cord and heard the whistle scream its throaty cry of conquest.

A quarter of a mile east of the trestle, Gashlin struck.

CHAPTER SIX

Hell Trestle

THE riders came out of the murk, half a dozen of them. They followed the train at a fast gallop. Rome whirled, jerking out his gun. He could make out the figure of Gashlin himself, leading the riders.

The locomotive rolled past a small gang of workers who dodged to avoid the oncoming horses. One of the riders shot at the railroadmen and Rome saw two of them go down. Then the locomotive swung around a bend out of sight of them. Rome hoped fervently that they would go for help.

They were rolling through the uncleared timber. The trestle would be coming up fast. Rome crouched in the cab with the pistons making a thundering sound under him. The wheels clacked round as the riders swung onto the last flatcar, one by one. Their guns were out and they advanced toward the cab through the rain. Gashlin carried a large dark parcel.

"Stop the engine!" he shouted to Rome over the roar. "Stop it on the trestle!" Rome triggered a shot and the men ducked. They were wolfish-faced in the gloom. Gashlin had evidently added a few gun hands to his force for the attack. Rome could see that his face was lined with worry and anxiety in the hell-glow of the firebox. His back was to the wall.

Rome debated the situation for an instant. They were not firing now, but stalking cautiously because they wanted the loco-

motive halted on the trestle. Rome guessed what the package contained. Dynamite.

It would be a crippling blow. A valuable switch engine, and more, a trestle that would take time to rebuild. They might never finish on time and Gashlin could keep his business. . . .

"Stop this thing!" Gashlin shouted. His voice was ragged, as if he knew his plan was not perfect or even well thought out. It was a desperate last-ditch attempt, hastily thrown together.

Carefully, Rome began firing. He dodged down over the steps of the tender, triggering his shots over the top. He had to time it carefully now, very carefully. Gashlin realized that he would not stop the train and he shouted orders to his men. They began firing, out in the open on the top of the flatcar nearest the tender.

Rome shot them down, one by one, all except Gashlin. It was a new sensation, feeling the complete power of the weapon in his hand. He took his time, wounding four of them. The fifth clutched his stomach and screamed, his body arching backward and falling from the lurching flatcar, lost in the darkness and the rain.

Gashlin remained. He came crawling around the opposite side of the tender. Rome edged his way back into the cab, his nerves tense and strained. Fear gnawed sickly at the pit of his stomach. He pulled the throttle all the way out and felt the locomotive shiver. Imperceptibly, it picked up speed.

Then he waited.

Gashlin appeared around the edge of the tender and hurled the package toward the boiler opening. Rome stepped out of the shadows and reached for it. His fingers stretched out and he wanted to scream aloud when he missed it by a fraction of an inch. He felt the thing brush his fingertips as the locomotive rocketed onto the trestle. He was off balance, and he tried to close his fingers on the dynamite. Gashlin was struggling to get a pistol out of his coat.

The dynamite went spiraling into the maw of the firebox. Rome, acting more by instinct than from thought, ran forward, smashing into Gashlin and pushing him backward, off the train. Rome tumbled with him for seemingly endless seconds, down and down, through rain and blackness.

Rome thought, My God, we may be falling into the cut, we may. . . .

He hit the ground and felt his body vibrate with the jarring pain. The locomotive rolled a thousand feet beyond the trestle, the last flatcar careening wildly, when it blew to pieces.

Rome flattened himself to the sodden ground, hiding his face. Heat and steam, and tiny pieces of metal stung his back.

He lay there, his heart thumping rapidly while the reverberations died away. Then he got shakily to his feet and surveyed the situation. The trestle remained intact with only a few lengths of rail ruined. The engine had disintegrated into a mangled ruin. The flatcars lay on their sides, rails and ties spilling onto the ground. Rome peered at them in the murk and then he thought of Gashlin.

Gashlin lay half a dozen yards away, unconscious, face up. Rome knelt near him, taking out a match from his pants pocket. Then he realized that he still held his gun in his left hand. He shifted it to the right, then stuck it awkwardly in his belt, laughing shakily at his own clumsiness. He finally got the match struck and cupped his hands around it, shielding it from the rain. He stared at Gashlin.

The man's face was bearded and weary looking. The strain, Rome thought, must have worn him to nothing. The business sliding out from under him, making this one attempt. . . .

Suddenly Rome thought of Job Thompson's death. Anger flooded over him and he pulled out the gun. Standing up, he pointed the barrel at Gashlin's head, his finger tightening on the trigger.

He stood that way for a long moment,

the rain whispering down darkly through the timber about him. Then he frowned. Slowly he pushed the gun back into his belt. Bending down, he hoisted Gashlin's unconscious form onto his shoulder and began to trudge westward through the rain.

Ten minutes later he met a handcar coming toward him from the end-of-track. Thankfully he dumped Gashlin's body on the platform and huddled down beside it. One of the railroadmen pumped the car back west while the others of the group went to look over the wreckage.

In the flaring light of the work area, where men labored in the glow from lanterns hung on poles beside the track, Rome met a tired Ben Hamilton. Quickly he explained what had happened. By the time he had finished the story, the sheriff had ridden in.

"This here's Mark Rome," Hamilton said wearily.

The sheriff reached for his gun.

Mark already had him under his sights. "Easy, Sheriff," Mark said. "I want to get this cleared up as much as you do. That's Bruce Gashlin on the ground. He blew up one of our switch engines and tried to blow out our trestle on top of it. He killed Job Thompson, or Cole Yancey did, on his orders."

"I don't figure it," the sheriff told him.

"Wait till he wakes up," Rome said. "I think things'll straighten out." Rome hoped they would. He was counting on Gashlin being the opportunist in any situation, quick to take advantage.

Rome shivered in the rain. A ring of men had gathered now, watching the scene intently. Hamilton ordered them back to work and they trudged away through the mud. Slowly, Gashlin stirred on the ground and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Rome's gun. Next his eyes fastened on the sheriff. He tried to get to his feet,



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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slipped in the mud and sank to one knee.

"Get up, Gashlin," Rome breathed.

He tried again, staggering to his feet.

Rome weighed his words carefully, hoping he had judged the man correctly. "We've got you dead to rights for dynamiting the engine and for having Job Thompson killed. You can take your chances and keep still or you can spill the whole thing and maybe you'll get off easier. Prison's better than a rope."

Gashlin told his story. Rome noticed that his eyes moved nervously and he wondered if he was stalling for time.

The sheriff fumbled to drag manacles from his pocket.

Rome was watching for the play.

The sheriff stepped between him and Gashlin. There was a flurry of movement. Hamilton shouted hoarsely and the sheriff jerked aside, howling in pain, clutching his hip. Gashlin, teeth bared, faced them, the knife shining for a moment until the rain washed the blood away. The sheath under his arm had one lace broken and dangled loosely on his chest.

Gashlin's arm started to come back, his eyes filling with animal hatred for Rome. The arm lashed upward and Rome pulled the trigger once and the knife dropped. Gashlin fell forward. His arms moved out feebly in an effort to stop his fall. The last opportunity, Rome thought suddenly.

Gashlin fell face down in the mud, quivered, and jerked over on his back. His face hardened into a mud-covered mask of death.

Hamilton was helping the sheriff. Rome tossed his gun away, feeling incredibly tired.

"Go to bed, Mark," Hamilton said over his shoulder. Rome nodded dumbly, rubbing his eyes. The collective exhaustion of the last few days hit him all at once and he made it to one of the tents. Somehow he managed to find blankets and a dry spot on top of some pine boards.

When he woke up nearly twenty hours later, the railroad had moved on.

It continued to move, after time for the

men to rest. During that time Rome saw the sheriff, answered a few last questions and rode out of Warknife, a free man. He stopped at the Circle JT. Mrs. Thompson welcomed him quietly and left him and Cathy alone in the parlor.

"Well, you'll be moving on, Mark," Cathy said.

He nodded. "Guess I will."

She touched his arm. "To say I'm sorry isn't enough: . . ."

Mark's smile was warm. "You don't have to say anything, Cathy."

"Do—you think?"—she hesitated—"you'll ever get railroading out of your blood?"

"Someday. Maybe soon. A man's got to settle sometime. The railroad'll need an agent here, with all the cattle shipping."

"It would be a good place," she agreed, and he smiled inwardly. Intuitively an understanding that came with growing older had sprung up silently between them. And the old affection could be rekindled. . . .

"But I've got to finish, this time," he told her. "I've got to see the Kansas and Western completed."

She nodded gently. "I know. I'll still be here."

"And I'll be back. I promise you that."

He kissed her in the doorway of the ranch house, warmly, passionately. She clung to him for a moment and then pushed him away, smiling. "Go on, Mark," she said quietly. "The railroad. . . ."

He squeezed her hand and walked out to his horse. He waved as he rode out of the yard.

The country was tinted with the light of early evening, and somewhere to the west, men labored and cursed to meet the deadline. Slowly, inevitably, the bands were joining the oceans, and he was part of that conquest. The iron horse . . . the eternal pioneers moving forward, sometimes clumsily, haltingly, but still forward.

Spurring his horse, he rode toward the burning ball of the sun, to where the end-of-track lay waiting.

By C. WILLIAM

HARRISON

Shaddock lowered his gun
and waited. . . .



LAST KILL

*"Twenty yards from freedom,
and you're too yellow to make
a try for it!" Shaddock's mor-
tal enemy taunted him. . . .*

HE CAME out of the deep hot black-
ness of the dungeon's corridor as
he always did, grumbling as his
key twisted in the reluctant lock, and curs-
ing above the squeal of the iron door's
hinges.

"On your feet, *ladinos!* Get a move on,
you ridge-runners, and earn your room and
board!" It was a harsh and arrogant voice,

with cruelty in it that raked Lew Shaddock out of his dreamless sleep and whipped his mind angrily alive.

It was Virg Lufton again, and the beginning of another night's long labor. Another night of feeling the sting of Lufton's taunts, hearing the malice in Lufton's mockery, reading the challenge and bitter promise that were in Lufton's eyes and the way he carried the shotgun.

"Come out of it, Shaddock," Lufton grunted jeeringly. "You're not in Mogul now, and this ain't the Crowtrack spread. Or do you think a killer with your reputation gets special privileges around here, too?"

And Shaddock felt the digging impact of the guard's boot toe ramming his ribs.

He came wearily erect, squinting against the glare of the lanterns, a lank, bony man whose frame could not afford the thirty pounds the prison had cost him. His head ached, and he was a little sick from heat and the eternal hunger. He looked at Virg Lufton, and the thought rose, sharp and strong, in this mind, like an oath: *I'll kill you, Lufton. One of these times I'll find my chance, and I'm going to kill you.*

He heard the hate-edged grumbling of the nine other prisoners who shared this dungeon with him, the clanking of their chains and ankle irons as they came erect. He heard Sid Florea break into a spasm of coughing, harsh and hacking, and knew that one of these nights they would be gouging a hole in the rotten granite of the graveyard for Sid's body.

Lufton was starting the familiar ritual of unlocking the chains that shackled each prisoner to ring bolts set in the dungeon's walls. The other guard, Fenton, stood well back from the grilled door, a wise precaution that was rooted in the virulence and scalding hatreds which were so much a part of this granite-walled room. The Snake Den, they called it, of Yuma's Territorial Prison.

Lew Shaddock stood motionless, trying

not to feel, trying not to think. But there were things a man could not ignore, that gnawed into his mind in spite of tiredness and ever present hunger. The heat was a tangible, spongy substance relentlessly pressing him, baking him; there was always the heat and never escape from it.

And there was always the sour smell of unclean bodies, the ammoniac odors of sweat and filth; always the complaining growl of voices and the obscenities as Lufton freed them from the chains that kept them from fighting each other.

"Stand back," Lufton said, and drove his bent elbow into Shaddock's middle.

The pain stabbed deep, and a wild and flaming rage flared through Shaddock. But he did not strike at the man. He had learned to take those brutalities without protest. One time he had struck back—only once. Afterward, shackled by his chains and the threatening shotgun of the other guard, he had been all but killed by Lufton's clubbing fists.

From beyond the grilled door, Fenton spoke uncomfortably. "Why don't you lay off him, Virg?"

He was a big man, this Virg Lufton. He was tall, with heavy shoulders and features that showed a fine precision of line and contour. A handsome man, and an arrogant one who knew how to nurse an old grudge. He grinned at Shaddock.

"What I give him, he likes. How about that, killer?"

Shaddock held his silence, not trusting himself to speak. A man could stand only so much torture, only so much taunting.

The malice pinpointed in Lufton's dark eyes. He raised his right hand and slowly tightened it into a fist. He pressed his knuckles against Shaddock's bare chest, twisted them against the skin in a deliberate grinding way.

"He likes what I give him, Fenton. Don't you, killer?" His voice, curiously soft in its mockery, demanded an answer. "Don't you? Tell him, Shaddock."

Lew Shaddock took a slow breath. "Go to hell, Virg."

"See? That means he likes it. So have some more, then," Lufton said, and drove his knuckles to Shaddock's face.

The blow slammed him back against the wall.

He caught himself, refusing to fall, straightened slowly, holding all expression from his face.

Fenton spoke dismally through the half darkness of the dungeon. "Some time he'll get his chance, Virg. You been ridin' him too hard, and he ain't the kind to ever forget. Some day he'll kill you."

"Maybe he'll try," Lufton grunted. "We've got an understanding, Shaddock and me. One day he'll make a break. It's what we're both waiting for. And I'm going to fill his guts with buckshot."

THIS was the night shift in Yuma prison, and it was not luck alone that put Lew Shaddock with the graveyard crew. This detail, he knew bleakly, was of Virg Lufton's doing, for the man found wicked pleasure in giving Shaddock a close look at freedom and holding him under the threat of his double-barreled Greener.

They moved along the rock corridor and up the steps to the outside compound. They angled across to the main gate under the watchful scrutiny of another pair of guards, these with rifles, stationed on the parapet above.

The prisoner in front of Shaddock stared up at the two guards with corrosive hatred. "Every night they stand up there watchin' us. Like they're hopin' for a chance to cut loose their rifles. Give me a gun, and they wouldn't be so eager."

Shaddock murmured, "Easy does it, Gagnon."

Roe Gagnon, who had ridden with Curly Bill and Ringo at Tombstone, swore acidly. "I keep wonderin' how straight they can shoot at night."

Another prisoner in the line grunted

cheerlessly. "Luke Monahoy found out four months ago."

"Maybe they were lucky that night."

"Two shots, two hits. It wasn't luck, Gagnon. I helped bury Luke, and I know."

They moved out through the main gate and down the path toward the cemetery, four labor-gaunted prisoners with a shotgun guard close behind. Light from Virg Lufton's lantern swayed against the darkness, dancing their shadows grotesquely. Heat followed them. Roe Gagnon stumbled and hurled bitter damnations at the night.

The sandstone path they were following curved out on the crumbling granite shelf of the graveyard, and short ahead was the rim of the bluff with the river hidden in the blackness below. Shaddock found his eyes measuring the distance to the rim, calculating against the accuracy of those two rifles on the prison wall and the deadliness of Lufton's shotgun.

And he remembered the way Luke Monahoy's body had jerked and collapsed as the heavy slugs tore into his back.

But the bluff's rim was so close across there, and the river so deep below, and a man couldn't keep from weighing his chances and scheming.

Virg Lufton's taunting drawl came up the line of prisoners to Shaddock. "It would be a good night for it, killer. No moon, and some clouds blowin' in to black out the stars. A good night to make your break, Shaddock."

A slow, scalding rage, savage and rebellious, was riding Lew Shaddock's desperate patience. Roe Gagnon, who was just behind him, snarled an oath at the guard.

"Keep riding a man until he makes a break, and then shoot him in the back! A real hero, you are, Lufton. And they chucked me into this hell-hole for a killing!"

Lufton's taunt pressed relentlessly against Shaddock. "How many yards now, killer? Twenty—thirty? Only a run and a jump for a man quick as you."

They came to the grave they had gouged open in last night's labor. They halted. Lew Shaddock stood rigid, not trusting himself to turn, yet, and face Lufton. A man couldn't take that kind of rawhiding forever. It kept lashing back at him, the sneers and taunts of other nights, the corrosive derision and those calculated brutalities. Tromp a man's toes, or spill the hot ashes of a pipe on his bare back. Call it an accident, but grin as you apologize. Work him hard and treat him mean, and see that he gets stingy meals of chili-flavored potato soup and a few soggy tortillas.

"Something on your mind, Shaddock?" came Virg Lufton's mocking drawl. "Turn around now, and tell me about it."

TWENTY short yards to the rim of the bluff and the concealing sanctuary of the river below. His eyes kept staring at the rim, and he recognized the danger of that moment. He turned slowly, forcing taut, aching lips into a bitten smile.

"It won't work, Lufton. You're wasting your time."

"Yellow!"

"Call it good sense." Shaddock's smile twisted into a thorny half grin. "What's smart in breakin' out of here when every Indian on the border is watchin' for a chance to earn the fifty bucks they get for bringing a prisoner back? Or making a run like Luke Monahoy did, and getting your Greener emptied in my back."

Virg Lufton's mouth twisted. "Twenty yards from freedom, and too yellow to make a try for it!" He shrugged, and stepped back a pace, the lantern in one hand and the shotgun hanging at arm's length in the other.

"All right, buckos, you didn't come out here for fresh air. You, Gagnon, team up with Jarboe, and finish cleaning out this grave. Bodie and Shaddock—move on down the line and start digging the next one."

Shaddock caught up a pick from the rub-

ble mound of the open grave, and turned away, followed by Phil Bodie. He walked slowly toward the place where the next grave was to be dug, and without thinking he turned his head furtively to see Virg Lufton standing back and to one side, watching Jarboe and Roe Gagnon.

In that same back-slanting glance he saw something change in Phil Bodie's face, a tightening awareness and leaping apprehension. It was as though Bodie suddenly understood something about Shaddock that Shaddock himself did not know.

Bodie's whisper broke out urgently. "It's the wrong time, kid. Don't try it!"

And all at once, without realizing he was going to, Shaddock broke into a hard run.

He knew instantly it was a fatal mistake. His run was hardly more than started when he saw Virg Lufton spin, set down the lantern, and swing the shotgun up in a single vicious movement. He knew at once that in making his break he had done exactly what Lufton had been waiting for him to do.

But there was no second chance now, no turning back or halting. He had made his break, and nothing he could do now would keep Lufton from shooting.

He heard Lufton's shout. "Stop, damn you!"

He threw himself to one side in a head-long dive. The shotgun roared. Shaddock struck the ground in a twisting roll, and heard the torn whispers of buckshot lashing the air over his head. He lurched up to hands and knees and hurled himself toward the rim of the bluff. Somewhere in the spinning blur of his vision he saw the flare of muzzle flame and heard the explosion of the Greener's second barrel. The thunder-clap of that shot seemed to follow him as he plunged over the rim's edge.

He was sliding down through dust and loose talus, and then this movement was halted with spine-jarring suddenness that buckled his knees and pitched him forward on bare granite.

There was shouting in the night above him, and the hard pound of a man's running. He rolled, found the edge of this narrow shelf, that had halted his fall, and hurled himself out into space.

He had a dim impression of the night-blackened river rushing up at him, and then the water slammed him with a force that seemed to tear every muscle of his body. It seemed he would never stop going down. He lashed out with his arms, beating the water, fighting an almost terrorizing desire to gasp for air. There was no breath in his lungs, and he was gagging. He kicked, fighting his way upward through a world of swirling wetness.

He burst to the surface of the river, and caught a blurred glimpse of Lufton's lantern pushing its yellow glare down through the night to the river. He heard Lufton's harsh shout as he dragged air deep into his lungs and went under again. The blast of the shotgun, muffled by the water, came to him, and he heard the slap of buckshot all around him.

He swam below the surface until his chest was tortured by his need for air. He pushed upward, filled his lungs, and went down again as Lufton's shotgun blasted the night. When he came up next time he was far out from the bank and beyond the reach of the guard's lantern.

There was no time for rest. He struck out for the far bank of the river, and now for the first time he began to realize the full power of the river. Those countless times he had studied it from high on the bluff where the prison stood, the Colorado had seemed slow, sluggish.

But now he was caught by the hard pull of the current sweeping him downstream, and he knew he could never make the distance to the far bank. The toughness wasn't in him for such a prolonged fight against the river, and there was not enough time.

A thought sank into his mind with dismal certainty: They'll get the dogs out, cross over on the ferry, and be there wait-

ing for me. Lufton will have it all figured.

Lufton—always Virg Lufton.

He knew then that he was going to kill the man. He had escaped from the prison's dungeons and walls, but even in this world of concealing darkness there was no freedom for him. There would be lawmen and hounds waiting across the river to pick up his trail, and the desert was a graveyard for hunted men. A man needed a good horse under him to break free from Yuma; he needed money, and a gun, and the help of friends he could trust. He had made his break—a fool's witless escape—but it was not going to give him freedom.

He was going to kill Virg Lufton. He knew that now.

A man could be a rustler or a road agent, or he could hire out his guns and deadly skill, as Lew Shaddock had. He could be a thief or a killer, and Yuma prison would always make room for him.

But prison was its own punishment, shackling a man with chains when before he had known only the feel of a good horse under him and the call of far horizons. Yuma punished a man with heat and gray granite walls, with monotony and hunger and the soul-twisting hatred of other outlaws. No prison guard had a right to add brutality to the punishment, as Virg Lufton had.

Decision hardened in Shaddock's mind, bitter and bleak, and he started stroking his way toward the thick black shadow of a willow grove only a short distance downstream from the prison.

It was a long gamble, and he knew he was stretching it thin in counting on them to hunt far and wide for him and never expect him to hide so close. But he was going to kill a man. Somehow, some way, he was going to get to Virg Lufton and kill him.

IT WAS easier than he had expected. All the next day he crouched in the tangle of willows. He could hear the racket of possemen and hounds searching upstream

and down, but not once did they come near the willows.

Hunger followed Shaddock through the day, and when night came he picked his way out of the willows and up the bluff, unsteady on his feet and a little sick. He angled toward town, avoiding the road and holding to the deeper pockets of night. He passed a clutter of 'dobe houses, and the loneliness in him sharpened as he heard the strumming of a guitar and the soft laughter of voices.

He moved on, slower now and with more caution. He picked his way across a rubble-littered lot, came to the narrow slot of an alley and followed this until he came to Yuma's main street. Here he halted, his gaunt shape pressed close to the wall of a building whose dusty odors identified it as a feed store.

There was a steady drift of traffic along the street. Two men moved toward the Oasis saloon, their voices reaching through the darkness to Shaddock.

"Just as well they call in the hounds and forget the hunt. The hombre is dead, all right. Hell, Lufton ought to know. He ain't one to miss when he cuts loose his shotgun."

"A lot of man, that Virg Lufton. I hear tell he tied a knot in Shaddock's tail one time up in Mogul county. Ain't afraid of anything or anyone, that Lufton. There's talk about runnin' him for sheriff next election."

"He can have my vote, and that's a fact. How's about stoppin' in for a drink, Jess?"

"Sure—sure. But you're buyin'."

The voices thinned out and faded. Lew Shaddock stood with the flat of his back against the wall of the feed store. The after echoes of what he had heard kept sliding through his mind, bringing back the memory of that dusty little cowtown up in Mogul county and the thunderclap of violence that had all but destroyed it. So Virg Lufton was taking his place in this town, just as he had up in Mogul; he was

making the same broad tracks and brave loud noises, and Yuma town was seeing the same aura of false glory.

And when he was dead Yuma would call him a hero.

A ranch hand, in town for some private celebration all his own, came weaving out of the *Oasis* and into the street. He turned toward the hotel, then reared back to a halt, wagging his head in some silent argument. He wheeled abruptly, and started past the alley in a slack-kneed walk.

"Wait, amigo."

The puncher drew up, hauled himself around in hazy bafflement. He stared owlishly into the alley's blackness, too drunk to be wary.

Shaddock spoke quietly. "You're packing a gun, amigo?"

The puncher blurted out belligerently, "Hell, d'I look neckid? Right here, mister." He fumbled his hand under his denim jumper, and then the swift-moving shadow of Shaddock's movement drove alarm into his brain, sobering him with sudden fear. "Hey, now. . . ."

Shaddock chopped his fist to the point of the jaw. He caught the man's sagging body, dragged him deeper into the alley, lowered him. He straightened, feeling the familiar weight of a Colt's in his hand. Afterward he turned back through the alley and made his way toward Lufton's house.

He could have made his kill through the window of the house. He stood there with the gun in his hand, listening to the flat and arrogant way Lufton drove his voice at his wife. She was a slim woman who looked as if she seldom smiled, with a dull and beaten sadness in her eyes and the shape of her mouth.

Shaddock looked at her through the mirror of his own loneliness and wanting. A man never knew what he had missed until he could look back at the drabness of his past and see the dismal emptiness of his future. There might have been a piece of land for himself somewhere, a home and the

love of a good woman. But he had cheated himself.

He could look back now and see where he had taken the wrong turn in the trail. He had sold his guns for gold and glory. He had always imagined he could quit when he wanted to, that he could turn a new page when the old one faded. But always there had been, another hill to cross, another range war to fight, another gunman to face.

He stood in the darkness by the window, seeing the tears standing in the woman's eyes and hearing the harsh and spiteful way Lufton used his voice on her. An arrogant, overbearing man, with a mean and malevolent streak in him. A man who fed on his own vanity, and bloated his own sense of power by crushing the will and resistance of others; who paraded his false glory before the town and hid his malice and spite among the secrets of his home.

Shaddock lowered his gun, and waited. He followed when Lufton came out of the house and headed upstreet toward the Oasis. He kept his distance behind the man, making no sound in the dust . . . waiting.

Some unforgotten sixth sense warned Lufton as he started past the closed doors of the feed store. He halted, half turned to look behind him, and even then he must have known the deep strike of panic.

Shaddock spoke softly. "Yeah, Virg—it's me."

Lufton completed his turn ever so slowly, as though afraid of disturbing some fine and delicate balance.

"I could have done it back there," Shaddock murmured. "But you've given your wife enough hell. Killin' you will be a favor to her, but I didn't want her close when it happened."

Lufton took a slow, dragging breath. "Shaddock . . . look, Lew, can't we . . . you and me—"

There was no change of tone or expression to betray him. He hurled violently to

one side, clawing out his gun. He slammed a shot at Shaddock, but it was the frantic snap-shooting of a man who prayed only for escape. A scared, panicked man. The full driving weight of his big body struck the door of the feed store, ripping hinges and hasp. The door crashed open, and he plunged through into the blackness of the inner room.

Shaddock bent, and ran. He hit the sagging door, and stepped swiftly to the side as Lufton's shot flamed at him. He felt the whip of the close-passing bullet, and heard the racket of confusion whipping up along the street outside.

A voice sent out a long high cry. "Them shots came from the feed store! Someone go get the sheriff!"

Shaddock moved deeper into the room, keeping the wall to his back. Somewhere in that pure blackness he could hear the low sharp scrape of Lufton's breathing.

"Two tries and I could drop you right now, Lufton," he said, and his voice carried cold and bitter mockery. "It's your breathing that's lining you up for me."

The whispered rasp of Lufton's breathing suddenly stopped.

Shaddock murmured contemptuously, "How do you know I can't hear your heart beating, Lufton? *How do you know I can't see you?* I've worked nights ever since they brought me to Yuma. Remember? And I've spent my days down in the dungeon, the Snake Pit. I'm used to darkness, Lufton. I can see a lot more than you'd believe. How do you know I'm not looking at you right now?"

A crowd was gathering outside. Some men crouching near the door called out a warning. "Stand back, all of you. It's Virg Lufton in there, and it sounds like he's got Shaddock cornered. Lufton can handle that killer. Just stay out of his way."

SHADDOCK eased open the loading gate of his Colt's, drew a bullet out of the cylinder. He sent the bullet skittering

across the bare boards of the floor. Two slashing tongues of flame exploded from the darkness across the room.

"You're an easy one to spook, Lufton," Shaddock drawled. "I'm over here, fella."

Lufton's breathing turned harsh again, a raw, choked sound. "Listen to me, Lew..."

"Begging won't help, Lufton."

"For God's sake, man. . . ."

A woman's anxious cry rose through the noises of the street. "Virgil! Is it my husband in there?"

"Now don't you fret, Mrs. Lufton," a man said. "Ain't no one better at this kind of work than your husband. He'll be all right, now."

Shaddock spoke softly, bleakly. "How do you like this, hero? You've made yourself out to be a hellbender, and they believed you. All but your wife, and she won't cry over your grave after the way you've treated her."

"Shaddock . . . listen to me, Lew." He was cracking, he was coming apart. He had made a lot of brave talk, and the people of Yuma had believed him, just as those of Mogul had. But now the cardboard castle of his false glory was crashing down on him, and panic was riding swift and hard in his rising voice.

"Listen, Lew! Nothing's happened that I can't square up. I've got some money...."

"I'm going to kill you, Lufton."

His voice sounded a rising note of terror. "No, Lew . . . please, Lew! I'll tell them how I've been riding you in prison. I forced you into making that break last night, but I'll square it for you. Please, Lew. I'll do anything you say."

His voice was a sickening thing to hear, and the silence of the crowd outside only deepened the shame. A man destroyed by his own arrogant vanity. And suddenly an impatience, bleak and relentless, surged through Lew Shaddock to have this last kill over and done with.

He lifted the six-shooter, slowly eared back the hammer.

"I'm going to kill you, Lufton. There were others before you—too many others. But no matter what lies you made the jury up in Mogul believe, I've given every man an even break. You're going to get yours, Lufton."

Shaddock slanted his six-gun to the floor. "Your gun is still loaded, Lufton. I'm going to fire one shot into the floor. That'll show you where I am. After that, I'm going to kill you."

Out of the silence of the street came the thin, frightened cry of Lufton's wife. "No! Please—please don't!"

Shaddock stood motionless. He could feel the weight of the gun in his hand, and he knew the exact moves he would have to make to kill his man. It was as if all of his life had been stark and cold, and now he could feel warmth for the first time.

He called out harshly to the woman, "He's been mean to you, ma'am. As mean as he has to some men I know. You'll be better off without him."

"No! Please—please. . . ."

"He's lived on bluff and lies. He's yellow, a coward."

"I know. I don't care."

"Then you still love this man?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

It was then that Lufton broke. He dropped his gun and fled through the darkness and out of the building to plunge blindly through the crowd, a man whose weakness and shame lay naked, now, before all eyes. Only the woman who was his wife followed him. . . .

Shaddock let the gun sink down to his arm's length, and stepped out past the sagging door. He stared at the men on the street, and he felt their eyes on him.

Presently he said, "A drunk lost this awhile ago." And then he dropped the gun into the thick dust of the street.

He turned his head, looking off across town toward Prison Hill. Nine years wasn't so long, he thought. It wouldn't be so hard to take, not now. . . . ★ ★ ★

"I don't allow guns in town,
Jesse," the sheriff said.



By
**RICHARD
FERBER**

The Pistol Kid Rides Home

There was still one place where he might talk to a friend, the Kid believed, and that was home . . . where the man he trusted was waiting—with a loaded gun!

SHERIFF BEN HALSMAN hooked the worn heels of his boots on the paper-strewn desk, fingered an unread circular, and gazed idly out the window of his office. It was past noon and the little

town of Hyattville was quiet, the one street almost empty of movement. Halsman shifted in the creaking chair, letting his long legs move farther and more comfortably onto the table that served him as a desk.

He was a big man, though leaner than his almost forty years would have suggested. His sandy hair had not yet begun to thin, though along his eyes and at the corners of his mouth the weathering had started. He was squinting now at the thin stream of sunlight that came in through the dusty window and he fought lazily against sleepiness and the occasional boredom that he felt.

He closed his eyes and then opened them irritably, and when he did, he saw the man come out of Bath's saloon and start hurriedly up the street toward him. He waited, recognized the man as Tad Gunter, the storekeeper, and thought, There's a man who's too much on the side of the law. He took makings out of the pocket of his shirt, started to roll a cigarette, and was just licking the paper into place when the storekeeper burst through the door. Halsman glanced at him briefly, then fell to studying carefully the results of his labor. He waited without interest for Tad Gunter to speak.

The storekeeper closed the door carefully behind him, and moved to the window to look out, blocking Halsman's view of the street. He was out of breath and his thin, crafty face was flushed with excitement. He turned and said:

"It's the kid, Halsman. He's back. I told you he'd be back."

Ben struck a match along the table, held it poised and said, "Who's back, Gunter, who's back?"

"The Kid," Gunter repeated rapidly. "Jesse Balzan."

Ben Halsman watched the match go out in his hand. He frowned for a moment, and then later, much later it seemed to the storekeeper, a faint smile came on his face. He said, "My God, *Jesse!*" and got to his feet, the smile broadening for an instant and then

passing. "Jesse Balzan," he said again, and moved quickly to the door.

He went out onto the sidewalk, then leaned back heavily and loosely against the side of the building and squinted down the street toward the door of Bath's saloon.

The smile came back to his face.

Behind him he heard Gunter move up and heard the man say, "If you need any help, Sheriff. . . ."

Ben laughed loudly, the lean frame of his body shaking. He turned, then, to the storekeeper, the smile suddenly gone.

"Take care of your store, Tad," he said severely. "And don't make any more of this than there is."

The storekeeper hesitated, his face indignant, then stepped lingeringly off the walk and started up the street. Halsman watched him for a moment, the smile wholly gone, and he thought for the first time, It's Gunter and his kind that make it hard on a man like Jesse Balzan. But he tried to dismiss the thought. There was no use looking for trouble. He could only be ready for it. Still, it was a bad thing, the Kid coming to Hyattville. Too many things had changed since he'd been here last.

The town had changed, and the people, too. They were different people now, they had changed into storekeepers, like Gunter, and squatters, and small ranchers, and where there had once been five saloons in Hyattville, there was only one now. He wondered then, if Jesse Balzan had changed, too, with the country, and he stepped down off the walk and started the length of the street toward the saloon. As he walked, he loosened the .44 in the holster, and he disliked himself instantly for doing it.

When he pushed open the doors of the saloon, he saw Jesse Balzan standing alone at the bar, hunched over his drink. The man didn't look up, and Ben remembered him that way—too sure, too fast to bother about who was coming through the door. He paused, his mind going back over the years. He checked the man against the way

he had once looked, and he found little change.

Jesse Balzan was a tall man, almost as tall as Halsman himself, only whereas Halsman was fair, Balzan was dark. And still, in many ways, they might have been brothers. There was little difference in their ages, and as Ben moved toward the man, he noted with satisfaction that the years had put as many wrinkles on the Kid's face. When he came up to him, he stopped, not speaking, waiting for Balzan to detect his presence. When he didn't, he turned to the mirror and saw Jesse watching him there, the crooked smile on his face that he remembered. He smiled back and said, "Welcome to Hyattville, Kid. It's been years."

Balzan turned then, his smile widening. Then his eyes moved down to Halsman's vest, saw the badge, and he reeled back against the bar, his laughter conspicuous in the midday silence of the saloon. But a moment later he stopped, quickly and unexpectedly. He said:

"Good to see you, Ben. I was drifting through Mungers two days ago. A man told me to ride clear of Hyattville because they had a bad sheriff over there. Said his name was Halsman."

"So you rode right over," Ben said, laughing.

"I didn't believe it, Sheriff," Jesse said.

"It's true," Ben spoke lightly.

Balzan laughed again, a friendly laugh, and turned to the bartender. He motioned for two drinks, then turned back, studying Halsman carefully, a faint mark of amusement in his eyes.

"Ain't these good folks of Hyattville a mite leary of having you for a sheriff, Ben?" he asked slowly. There was a tone of innocence and humor in his voice.

"Some think about it, I guess," Ben answered. "But people forget easy."

Balzan glanced around the saloon casually, a small glint of defiance in his eyes. He said, "They seem to recollect me all right, Ben. They're as fidgety as a trail cow with-

out water. I reckon if there was anyone here packing a gun, I'd be in a fight by now."

Halsman answered slowly, measuring his words, trying to make them sound casual. He said, "I don't allow guns in town, Jesse," but his eyes involuntarily moved to the worn butt of Balzan's Colt. Balzan followed his eyes, reading the meaning there, but his expression of amusement didn't change.

"I came here lookin' for an old friend, Ben," he said slowly. "I didn't come here lookin' for trouble."

"The law's the same for everybody, Jesse," Ben answered him.

Jesse turned to his drink, glanced back at Halsman, and laughed again.

"Look who's talkin' about the law," he said good-naturedly.

"That was a long time ago, Kid," Halsman said evenly. "That's done."

He turned to take the drink, tossed it down and felt the burning of the liquor. For a moment he leaned against the bar, elbows down, and stared at Jesse's and his own reflection in the mirror. Behind them, on the far wall, he could see the painting of the woman. He remembered when they had stood here years ago when they were kids and had stared at that painting because they had never seen a woman like that before. And he remembered the other saloons they had seen and the other places they had ridden to.

His mind went back across the years to the fall they spent in the Brazos, the fall that they rode with the border gang and he, Halsman, had killed a man. Then back to the time in Dodge when Jesse had gotten drunk and they could never remember how the fight started. But some man had been shot and they'd barely gotten out of town ahead of the posse. And after that Tucson, and Pony Bend, and Two Rock, always moving and not thinking much about it. Until, in Abilene, Jesse had shot a deputy in the leg and they had caught him and sent him to prison. Ben had gone home then, be-

cause alone it wasn't the same. That had been years ago and Halsman had changed, just like everything else had changed. Only Jesse had never changed at all.

WHEN the Kid had gotten out of jail he killed a man in Albuquerque and then it was some Mexican on the border, and later there was a marshal back in the Mariás. Ben had heard about that, because when you use a gun like the Kid, news travels fast. But later, when he'd been voted in as sheriff of Hyattville, it had been easier to follow Jesse Balzan because there were the posters. He had kept them all, not knowing why, not thinking much of what they meant. He thought of them now, and he thought that he had never expected to see Jesse Balzan again, and his eyes suddenly darted to the man's face.

The Kid was watching him, his mouth turned up, in a faint snile, but there was a coldness in his eyes. He straightened up, turned, and studied the painting carefully.

"You always had an easy face to read, Halsman," he said quietly. "Remember that picture? She ain't much now."

"Things change, Jesse," Ben answered softly. "The only trouble is, sometimes a man *doesn't*."

"Meaning me, Ben? Jesse asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, went on. "Sometimes it's not as easy as that. Sometimes when you get started you can't keep from going that way. Sometimes when you get on the prod it's too hard to stop. It's like a herd, Ben—sometimes when they start runnin' you can't stop 'em till they drop."

"Is that what's going to happen to you, Jesse?" Ben asked.

"Look, Ben," Jesse said sharply, the casualness gone. "There's one man in every town that would like to put a bullet in my back. Every time I turn around I look to see that man. It's too late to change, Ben, 'cause as soon as I do, that man is going to be there."

"He'll be there anyway, Jess," Ben said quietly. And later, when he got no answer, he said, "Jesse, I'm sorry. I've got to have your gun."

Balzan watched him, the surprise showing only faintly on his face, but he took a step back, bringing his gun holster clear of the bar. His eyes had a sudden hardness that Halsman couldn't remember having seen in them before. He sucked in his breath and let it out heavily. When he spoke, there was a slight tremble in his voice.

"No. No, I guess not, Ben," he said.

At the quiet words, Halsman felt his own uncertainty. This was no ordinary man he was talking to, no half-drunk cowpoke who thought he was too fast with a gun to bother arguing. He knew Jesse Balzan well. If he tried to press the man farther, somebody would be hurt. And if the Kid did turn over his gun, he wouldn't live till sundown. There was a reward of two hundred dollars on his head, and he'd be a target for every man in town who could shoot, once they saw the empty holster. Halsman liked Jesse Balzan too much for that. He tried to fight back the feeling of guilt, the knowledge that there were many other men that he would rather see dead. He wished the Kid had never come here, or that he had died somewhere, sometime, without him, Halsman, having heard it. He wished he had forgotten Jesse Balzan years ago. He said gently:

"You're not welcome here, Jess. I should put you in jail, or I should try. But I won't bother you. Only you're not welcome here."

"I only came to see an old friend," Balzan said mildly.

"It's not that way any more, Jesse," Halsman answered him. "It was that way years ago. Now, I guess I've changed."

Balzan didn't answer. He glanced around the saloon, studying indifferently the faces of the few customers, his eyes lazy and uninterested. Then abruptly he turned back to Halsman, his eyes softer now, his face sud-

denly aged. When he spoke the curt indifference was somehow gone from his voice. He said wearily:

"I'm sorry, Ben. I guess you're right. I'll be gone by sundown. Maybe I'll have a few drinks, and then maybe on my way out of town I'll stop at the old sump where we used to go swimming. Remember when. . ."

"The sump's dried up, Jesse," Ben said deliberately.

"I thought it might have," Balzan said quickly and disappointedly.

"And remember, Jesse," Ben said curtly, at once regretting his words, "the longer you stay here, the more likely trouble is."

"I know, Ben," Jesse answered, his voice quiet and kindly. "Your friends here are itching to get a look at my back." He paused, his eyes set hard on Ben, then the smile came to his face again.

Ben saw it, smiled back, and heard the man say, "Only don't crowd me, Ben. I never did take to crowdin', even from you."

Halsman caught the change in the man's eyes, that coldness that he couldn't remember. He took a step back, still searching the Kid's face for a sign of his feelings, but he found nothing, and suddenly, his own feeling gone, he turned and moved quickly away. His footsteps sounded too loud on the uncertain boards of the floor. He knew that Balzan was watching him from behind, and for a moment he pictured the solitary figure of the man standing at the bar, the man with a gun and, now, finally without a friend. He was through the swinging doors and out on the sidewalk when Tad Gunter stepped from the side of the building.

Ben tried to move from him, but the storekeeper stepped in close.

"What happened, Sheriff?" he asked quickly, his voice high-pitched with excitement.

Halsman pushed the man aside and moved on, but Gunter, unruffled, caught up with him again. He spoke in a voice that grated on Halsman's nerves.

"That man's a killer, Sheriff," he said

emphatically. "He should be in jail or dead. It's your job, Halsman. We put you in. It was us. . . ."

Ben whirled on him savagely and swung him back against the building with a crash, feeling the frailty of the little man's body. He twisted the storekeeper's shirt roughly in his hand and said, "Stay away from him, Gunter." His breath was coming rapidly, now, and his voice wavered when he spoke. "Stay away from him. He's leaving here. He'll not trouble you. Only stay away from him."

He slammed the storekeeper farther against the wall, and then, the anger suddenly gone from him, he released his grip and turned quickly away. He took the long step off the sidewalk and strode toward his office, the dislike for the man riding deep in his belly. He heard Gunter mutter, "You're a coward, Halsman," but he didn't stop. And once in his office, he felt the anger coming back again, and he paced up and down, the laziness of the afternoon gone from him.

It was half an hour later that he had finally settled into the chair again, his feet propped on the desk, his eyes fixed on the door of Bath's saloon. The sun had left the window, but its warmth was still in the room and Ben stifled a yawn. After all, Jesse Balzan would soon be gone, and then his, Halsman's, worries would be over. He could forget the Kid again, except maybe for the posters. And he could forget, too, that Jesse was an old friend, and that, as a lawman, he should have arrested him. But it was better this way. Someday the Kid's past would come riding up to him, but he didn't want to be that part of the past,

HE WORKED the thoughts over in his mind and it was then that he turned and saw the men moving down the sidewalk across the street. He got to his feet, saw that Tad Gunter was one of them, and crossed the room in long, rapid strides. Outside he paused, yelled "Gunter"

loudly, angrily, and then moved toward them, his eyes fixed hard on their faces.

When he came up to them, he saw the guns slung at their sides. There were eight of them, all the men in town that Gunter could gather up at that time of day. He let his eyes run over their faces, saw Tom Rayner, his face flushed and bewildered, and Sam Alpert, the stableman, and Hollis McCleary, a pimple-faced kid who worked the Meeker spread. He was about to turn his eyes away when Mark Stuart's boy, Jeb, stepped around the group and said:

"If you're counting faces, Halsman, you'd better count mine."

Ben looked at the boy . . . he was scarcely nineteen. He saw the excitement there, and turned to Tad Gunter.

"If you want to get yourself shot, Gunter, why don't you do it by yourself?"

"I'm no gunman, Halsman," Gunter snapped. "But I'm willin' to do my share."

"Are you?" Ben asked sarcastically. And then, "Listen to me, men. Jesse Balzan's done nothing to you. Most of you don't even remember him. Why don't you leave him alone?"

"The man's a killer, Halsman." It was Hollis McCleary who spoke.

"That should have been enough to decide you the other way, Hollis," Ben answered him.

"I reckon it decided *you*, Sheriff," McCleary returned, stepping clear of the group and facing Ben angrily. "You don't seem hankerin' to do your job."

"My job is to see that nobody gets killed in this town, Hollis," Ben said evenly.

"Does that include *you*?" McCleary asked, the derision plain in his voice.

"It does," Ben answered softly. He hesitated, letting his mind run over the thought, and from the back of the group he heard Jeb Stuart say, "I like what the man says, Halsman."

"Like it or not," Ben snapped, "get off the street till you're rid of your guns." He was bluffing, but he moved toward the men,

threateningly, and the group started to edge off and split up. He listened to the bitter words and waited, the impatience growing in him, until they had drifted off up the street. As he crossed toward his office he felt the tension begin to leave his body, but when he reached the door and looked up the street again he saw Jeb Stuart and Hollis McCleary standing together, watching him.

He returned their look, reading their thoughts plainly enough, but in a moment he stepped inside the office, knowing that he had done all that he could. He settled in the chair again and closed his eyes, waiting. It would be only a matter of time, now.

By sundown, Jesse Balzan, the Kid, would be clear of Hyattville. And then the people of the town could stop worrying about the man; Tad Gunter could go back to running his hardware store, and Jeb Stuart and Hollis McCleary could stop thinking big about shooting it out with a man like Jesse Balzan. And he, Halsman, could worry about something else, worry about the rustler who had killed two of Meeker's cows, or worry about what he would do with Bill Turpin when he got drunk the next time, or wonder if he'd run again when the next election came around. It was an easy job, as easy as that, and it would be like that again after sundown.

He opened his eyes once to test the brightness of the sun against the window, found it was still the middle of the afternoon, and closed them again. Outside, the street was silent, as silent at this time of day as it had been for almost as many years as he could remember it. Somewhere in the office a fly buzzed loudly as though caught in a spider's web and he listened lazily, disinterestedly, to the sound.

It was later, nearer sundown, when he awoke, half-thinking that he had heard the shots. But when he got to his feet he heard nothing and he stretched and moved lazily to the door, his tall body stiff and inactive

from the sleep. Once outside he remembered Jesse Balzan and stared closely at the sky. Behind the town the sun only half-showed over the rim of the hills now. He stopped on the walk, stretched again, and glanced in the direction of Bath's saloon. It was then that he saw Gunter come through the swinging door and move toward him. The man was coming fast, running stiff-legged—and frightened.

Ben Halsman knew what had happened. He took a step forward to meet him, then stopped, waiting, the reluctance taking hold of him. Perhaps it was something else, he thought, but by that time Gunter had come up to him.

"I told you, Halsman," Gunter shrieked. He was out of breath, his voice high-pitched and hysterical. "I told you before. This wouldn't 'a' happened if you'd let us alone. You're a damned fool, Halsman, and I'll see that you pay for it. I'll see that. . . ."

"What is it, Tad?" Ben said quickly. "What is it?"

"The Kid just shot Stuart and McCleary," Gunter answered, his voice quivering with excitement. "Shot 'em down at Bath's saloon. Shot 'em in the stomach. They didn't have a chance."

Ben heard the words, his mind almost numb to the feeling of them. He took a step past the storekeeper, leaned heavily against the once-painted boards of the office, and stared blank-eyed down the street. He said, "They had their chance. They had a chance to stay away from Jess." He paused, not hearing the excited babble of the storekeeper next to him, feeling the sickness that had settled deep in his stomach. He knew how it had happened, two gun-crazy kids who were too young to remember Jesse Balzan, two kids who were looking for somebody to kill without having to pay for it.

Well, they had picked the wrong man. But that didn't matter now; alive or dead, Jeb Stuart and Hollis McCleary didn't matter. What mattered was that Jesse Balzan was down at Bath's saloon, and Gunter and Sam

Alpert and the rest of them were waiting for Ben Halsman to go down to him. Halsman straightened up, his shoulders hanging wearily, and thought, It's been a long time since I went out to kill a man. Too long . . . too long, especially, when that man was once your best friend. He tried to remember back, back to the time in the Brazos, and the other times, after he had become sheriff.

A man's life had seemed less, then, and his own life less than that.

But it was different now; it was too long since he'd thought of dying, or was it because, only lately, he had thought of it at all? But that didn't matter—the thinking didn't matter.

BATH'S was on a corner, it had two doors, and he said to Gunter, "You take the side door. I'll go in the front." But he didn't expect an answer. He moved slowly down the street, hearing the storekeeper's faltering steps behind him, and knowing suddenly, as he should have known all along, that he was alone. The thought caused a tightness in his chest, and he slackened his pace. But he was almost to the saloon now.

The door swung open, throwing light out into the street, and he found himself trapped there, and moved swiftly to the shadows of the sidewalk. But he saw the two men dragging Stuart's body, and he stepped up to them.

He said, "Is he dead?"

"I don't know," one of them, Bill Jessup, answered.

From the light under the door, Halsman saw the redness on the boy's shirt front, and he watched it for a moment, unthinking, his mind not registering the sight. Then he heard Jessup say, "He's in there," and he pushed gently at the swinging doors and stepped into the half-brightness of the saloon.

The Kid was standing at the bar, hunched

(Continued on page 106)



No Trail for a Tenderfoot

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Pilgrim or puncher, the brand of a real man goes deeper than the kind of a rig he wears, or kind of gun he packs. . . .

HE WAS lost.

It was ridiculous, of course. He, John Barron, was an intelligent man. Indeed, he was considered a clever man by his business associates back in Philadelphia—and such a man should never lose his sense of direction. But it was true, and no amount of reasoning that such a thing shouldn't be could alter the fact that he was alone and lost in the immensity of

limitless and lonely space that was Kansas.

Reining in his tiring sorrel atop a grassy swell, Barron peered toward the horizon in every direction—and saw nothing but undulating prairie, and the vast inverted bowl of the sky. Until a few days ago, he had not even imagined that there could be so much sky and beneath it so much land lacking landmarks or inhabitants to guide a traveler.

He took out his watch. It was seven minutes past six o'clock in the evening, and in another hour it would be dark.

Barron was a perfect target, and he darted away from the house as the Maughers opened fire. . . .



His stomach growled a complaint. He had eaten breakfast at dawn and nothing since, and for the first time in his life he knew real hunger. He reached for a cigar, bit off its tip, lighted it, thinking that a smoke would perhaps dull the pangs of hunger. He was not frightened yet, but he was mildly worried.

He had started for Dodge City that morning, leaving his party some thirty miles southwest of Dodge. And the guide, who was leading the party of Eastern sportsmen—five of them besides himself—had said, "Keep riding northeast. If you figure you're lost, just head north until you hit the Arkansas and then head downstream and it'll take you in. You'll know which is north—" he'd chuckled, finding a tenderfoot amusing—"by keeping an eye on the sun."

The sun had failed Barron. It was lost in clouds, and there had been no break in the leaden sky since an hour after he left camp.

He could not tell in which direction he was going. He should have reached Dodge hours ago, for he had set out at a brisk canter that carried him many miles within the first couple of hours. His mount was a good one; it had been loaned to him by a friend who was an officer at Fort Dodge. The animal was of no help, however; he had tried giving it its head, but the sorrel merely continued in the direction in which Barron's hand on the reins had last pointed it.

It had been a foolhardy thing to attempt. He realized that now, too late. But he had been reminded of a business matter which he had neglected to attend to before leaving on his trip, and it was urgent that he send a telegram to his firm in Philadelphia immediately.

Immediately?

Barron smiled wryly. It might be days before he found his way to Dodge.

He was a lean, rather handsome man of forty-five, already gray at the temples. As

he rode he smoked a fine Havana cigar. After a while a tiny moving speck far across the prairie caught his eye. He peered at the speck until his eyes ached, finally making it out as a rider. A sigh of relief escaped him. He deadened his cigar on his boot heel, threw it to the ground, then rode to meet the oncoming horseman.

THEY reined in facing each other, ten minutes later, and sized each other up before a word was said. The other man was typical of the Westerners with whom Barron had rubbed elbows during his several days in Dodge. He was rough-looking, and badly in need of a shave and a bath. He was about Barron's age, a bulky man with a heavy face. His eyes were small and beady, and the gleam in them showed cunning rather than intelligence. His mouth was thick lipped and slack. His jaws worked on a tobacco cud. He wore the usual broad-brimmed hat, and Army breeches, high-heeled boots, and a dirty buckskin jacket.

He said, "Howdy."

Barron nodded, smiled. "I'm glad to have met you," he said. "I'm afraid I've lost my way. I'm on my way to Dodge City. Am I headed right?"

"Not by a long shot," was the answer. "You're headed south. You're on your way to no man's land." He studied Barron some more, then spat and asked, "Tenderfoot, eh?"

"Yes."

"Fancy talker too."

"If I turn about, I'll be headed straight toward my destination?"

"Yeah. So long as you don't ride in a circle, as you're apt to."

"You wouldn't be on your way to Dodge City?"

"I might be, if it was worth my while."

Barron chuckled. Economics. Business. Everything had a price, even in the middle of nowhere. Profit and loss; that ruled all the activities of mankind. He said, "I'll

make it well worth your while, friend."

"How much?"

"How much is your time usually worth?"

The man spat again. "For a hundred dollars, I'll have you in Dodge by midnight."

"The price is a little steep, friend."

"Well, you can pay it or find your own way."

"What makes you think I'm able to pay such a sum?"

The man let his murky gaze take in Barron's tweed coat, whipcord breeches, military-style boots, his watch chain, and the fine English rifle in his saddle scabbard. "I don't need to answer that," he said. "I'll take the money now."

Barron took out his wallet, counted out five twenty-dollar bills, held them out to the man. The beady eyes were on Barron's wallet as a grimy hand grabbed the money. Barron put the wallet back into his inside coat pocket. The hundred dollars vanished into the faded Army pants.

"Well, let's get started, tenderfoot."

"John Barron is the name," said Barron. "May I ask yours?"

"I'm from Texas. So just call me Tex."

"All right, Tex," Barron said, and turned his sorrel to ride beside Tex's dun horse.

"You a banker, maybe?"

"No. I own a foundry and a machine shop in Philadelphia. And you?"

"Well, I'm sort of in the cattle business."

"Interesting, ranching. I think I would enjoy it," Barron said. "I've gone a bit sour on my own business and city life. That's why I came West to shoot buffalo. I—"

Barron broke off abruptly, aware that Tex had dropped behind him. He twisted in the saddle and looked back, and alarm knifed through him. Tex had reined in and now held his six-shooter in his hand.

The gun was leveled at Barron's back.

"Tex!" Barron yelled.

"I'm going to Dodge alone, dude," Tex

said. "With the money you're carrying!"

He thumbed back the revolver's hammer, and Barron, wheeling his horse about, grabbed for his hunting rifle.

The rest of it was blurred for John Barron. There were three shots. Two from Tex's gun, and one from Barron's rifle. Tex's first shot caught the sorrel in the head, dropping it in a thrashing heap. Barron flung himself from the saddle as the horse went down, and fired the instant his feet hit the ground. Tex cried out, reeled in the saddle, and his second shot went wild. He toppled from his horse, and sprawled beside it, dead.

For a moment John Barron thought that he would be violently sick. Then he got control of himself and the feeling passed. He managed to look objectively at what had happened. He had taken a life, true, but only to save his own. He had killed, but he had not murdered. But for a miracle, he would be lying dead and the savage brute who had called himself Tex would now be robbing his body.

He found that the dead man's horse had been only mildly spooked by the shooting. He turned and knelt by Tex. After rolling the body onto its back, he removed his hundred dollars from the dead man's pocket. He saw that his slug had caught Tex in the chest, and, since death had been immediate, it must have drilled the heart. The buckskin jacket had gaped open when the body was moved, and Barron saw that there was a wallet inside it.

He took Tex's wallet and looked into it. It contained four bills, three ones and a yellow-backed ten. Thirteen dollars. . . . Pocket change for a man like John Barron.

In another part of the wallet was a letter addressed to Mr. W. C. Naylor, General Delivery, Dodge City, Kansas, and a soiled and worn photograph of a young and rather attractive woman. Barron studied the picture at some length. Yes, the woman was attractive, and refined looking, which was surprising when Barron considered the

brutish Tex. He took the letter from the envelope, and in the failing light saw that the feminine handwriting was that of a person of some education. He read:

Dear Will:

By the time you read this you will have ended the long trail-drive from here on the Brazos River. I hope you had no trouble along the trail. Indeed, darling, I pray every night that you and your crew and the herd are safe.

Tommy and I are well, but miss you terribly. I do not want to worry you, dear, but your brother Bart has come to the ranch again and I am uneasy about him. Two of the Maughers are with him, and the three of them lie around drinking and playing cards all the time. I am a little afraid of the Maughers, but so far Bart has been decent enough to keep from bothering me.

At night I keep the revolver you left with me under my pillow. Bart has demanded money of me, but I have none to give him. He won't believe that I am without money, and this morning he searched the house in the hope of finding some. I know he is your brother, Will, but if I could slip away with Tommy, I would go to the law for protection. They would never let me leave, however.

There was quite a bit more, and Barron could read between the lines and see that the woman who had written the letter was badly frightened. He looked at the signature. It was, *Your loving wife, Clara.*

He looked at the postmark on the envelope. The letter had been mailed from a place called Burnt Timbers, Texas, nearly a month ago.

Baron returned the letter to the wallet, then looked at the photograph again. The woman had a sweet, rather wistful smile. She appeared to be a blonde, and her eyes were light—either gray or blue, he guessed. He slipped the wallet into his coat pocket.

He turned away from Will Naylor's body, and mounted the man's horse.

He rode until darkness came, then, fearful that he would ride in circles without knowing it, he halted and dismounted. He off-saddled and staked out the dun. There was a blanket roll tied behind the cante. He spread it on the ground and wrapped himself up in the blankets.

It was long before he slept. He lay thinking of Will Naylor, wondering why the man hadn't hurried home to his wife when she was in danger. When he finally slept, it was restlessly. He dreamed. He was haunted by a woman's eyes that silently accused him of killing her man. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

No Pilgrims Wanted

THE current sheriff of Ford County, Kansas, was named Slade. He was civil enough toward John Barron, but he wasn't much interested in the death of Will Naylor. He sat slumped in his desk chair and looked half asleep as Barron told his story. The truth was, nobody in Dodge City cared much what happened to Texans.

It slowly dawned on John Barron that there was to be no investigation. Things weren't done here as in Philadelphia.

Barron had given Slade the wallet he'd taken off Naylor's body, and the lawman now read the letter it contained. The thirteen dollars was still in the wallet, but the photograph of the woman was not. It was in Barron's pocket.

"This Naylor sold his cattle, paid off his trail-hands, then set out to have some sport," said Slade. "Maybe he got drunk and somebody rolled him. He decided that, if he murdered you, he wouldn't have to go back home empty-handed."

"And this is the end of the affair?"

Slade nodded. "You've identified yourself," he said. "Your reporting this affair is proof enough for me that you're on the level."

Barron said, rather stiffly, "Well, thank you, Sheriff." He rose to leave. Then asked, "What about the body?"

"Quit worrying about the whole thing, Barron."

"I'll try," Barron said. "It's not easy. You see, I've never killed a man before. And killings aren't taken so casually where I

come from." He was silent a moment. "Shouldn't his wife be notified?" he asked. "I'll write to her," Sheriff Slade said. Barron nodded and went out.

* * *

The Brazos River settlement of Burnt Timbers consisted of no more than two dozen houses and buildings, some adobe and some log and a few plank. It dozed in the sun by the red-running river, and it was the first back-country town that John Barron had ever visited.

He rode in on a roan horse that he had bought in a town called Wellsville. The stage that had carried him west from Fort Worth went no farther than Wellsville, and so he'd had to acquire a mount.

It was three months since he'd killed Will Naylor. In the meantime, Barron had been back to Philadelphia. He had tried to immerse himself in his business affairs and renew his social life. He had not been able to keep his mind on it. The woman, Naylor's wife, had become more and more real for him. Not a day had passed without his looking at her picture. And even when his mind was busy with other matters, he had found her creeping into his thoughts.

He felt he had to know if she was still in danger, if she was still in want, so he turned his business over to an assistant, packed a bag, and at Broad Street Station caught the first westbound train. It had been a long, tiresome trip by train and by stage-coach—and now on horseback. With every mile, his eagerness had grown.

The largest building in Burnt Timbers, an unpainted plank affair of one story, was both a saloon and a general store. Barron swung over to it, watched curiously by a dozen of the settlement's people, and dismounted.

He had bought new clothes in Wellsville, outfitting himself in the manner of the cow country, for he did not want to be taken at sight for a tenderfoot. He wanted

to pass unnoticed, if he possibly could.

He wore a flat-crowned gray Stetson, a gray flannel shirt, levis, cowpuncher boots. He wore no six-shooter, but there was a Winchester rifle on his saddle. In the twenty-odd miles along the road from Wellsville, enough dust had settled on his clothing to dull their newness.

He entered the saloon part of the building, found it quiet. Two old men sat playing checkers at a table. A solitary drinker was at the bar. The bartender rose reluctantly from a stool at the end of the bar and came to serve Barron. He was a fat, bald man who lacked the amiable manner fat men are supposed to possess. He was curt.

"What'll it be?"

"Whiskey. And directions to the Naylor ranch."

The bartender filled a shot glass with red whiskey, and Barron put a silver-dollar on the bar. The fat man watching him, he downed his drink and shuddered over it. He took out a cigar, then offered one to the bartender. The man sniffed at it, then bit off its end and puffed it alight on the match Barron held for him.

The man farther along the bar called, "Mike, fill this up again."

Mike went down-bar, then returned to Barron. "The Naylor ranch, you say?"

"Will Naylor's ranch."

"He's dead. The way I heard it, he was killed in Dodge City."

Barron nodded. "I heard something like that," he said. "What about his family?"

"His widow and kid still live out there." Mike was curious, and didn't try to hide it. "You got business with Mrs. Naylor?"

"In a way," Barron said. "Let's say I'm an old friend of hers."

Mike grinned suddenly. The fine Havana seemed to have mellowed him. "I get it," he said. "You were one of her suitors before she married Will. I guess you knew her up in Missouri, eh? That's where Will got to know her. Well, I don't blame you for wanting to look her up, now that she's

without a man. A mighty handsome woman, Clara Naylor."

Barron let it go at that, and again started to ask directions. But before he could speak, the other man at the bar turned and stared at him.

"It could be that you won't be welcome out there, bucko."

"What makes you think that?"

The man moved toward him. He was big, not so tall as Barron, but half again as thick through the body. His face was Indian-dark, with a wiry black stubble to make it darker.

"I don't think it, I know it."

"And just who are you?"

"Maugher's my name. Jess Maugher."

Barron started, remembering that name from Clara Naylor's letter to her husband. There were several Maughers, according to the letter, and along with Bart Naylor, Clara's brother-in-law, they had been making trouble for her.

"Heard of me, have you?" Maugher demanded.

Barron shrugged. "I'll let Mrs. Naylor tell me I'm not welcome," he said, and turned back to the bartender. "How do I find the ranch, Mike?"

But Jess Maugher wasn't done with him. He grabbed Barron's arm, spun him about, and said, "Bart Naylor's a friend of mine, hombre. He's taken over his dead brother's spread, and I'm not letting you make trouble for him. I'm going to—"

"You're drunk," Barron said. "Get away from me."

"Why, you—"

Speechless with rage, now, Maugher again grabbed Barron by the arm. Barron threw off the man's hand and gave him a violent shove. Maugher reeled backward, collided with the table where the two old men played checkers. The table toppled and Jess Maugher dropped heavily to the floor with it. He rolled over and rose to his hands and knees, and stared up at Barron with hate-filled eyes. With a bellow of

rage, he heaved to his feet and pulled his gun from its holster.

The two old men left their chairs with surprising speed and made for the door, and the bartender said, "Watch it, stranger—watch it!"

Barron was already in motion, closing in on Maugher. With one hand, he caught hold of the barrel of the revolver and with the other he grabbed Maugher's arm by the elbow. He slammed the man's wrist hard against the edge of the overturned table.

A howl of pain came from Maugher, and he dropped his gun. Barron stooped and picked it up, tossed it onto the bar. Maugher hugged his hurt wrist to his chest, muttering to himself.

The bartender eyed Barron with surprise.

"Nice work, friend," he said. "You don't look tough, but you sure handled him."

Barron was surprised himself. He hadn't realized that he had a capacity for brawling. He had acted with great speed, as he had when Will Naylor tried to murder him. And strangely enough, he had done the right thing. He watched Maugher, who was braced for trouble. But Maugher had had enough. He went staggering from the saloon, still holding his hurt wrist tightly against his body.

Mike said, "Yeah, you took care of him. But you've made a bad enemy. He's apt to lay for you. Seems to me that you'd better start packing a gun."

"I've got a rifle on my saddle," Barron said. "That's all I need."

"Yeah? Well, you'd better keep it within reach from now on."

"You really think he'll make trouble for me?"

Mike regarded him with surprise again. "That's a fool question," he said. "You're a queer one, friend. Or don't you have hardcases where you come from? I'd gamble that Jess will try to even the score with you. And another thing, bucko. There are more Maughers than Jess, and when you

take on one, you take on the others. Watch your step from now on."

"How many of them?"

"Two besides Jess. There's Russ and Luke. I haven't seen Luke around lately, but Russ ain't far off."

"I'll watch out for them," Barron said. "Now how do I find the Naylor ranch?"

IT WAS another dozen miles to the ranch. Excitement gripped John Barron when he emerged from a cut in some craggy bluffs and saw the squat adobe buildings. The buildings stood in a bend of a creek, in the shade of a clump of cottonwood trees. It was a rather squalid place for the home of such a woman as Barron imagined Clara Naylor to be. But then he asked himself, "How do I know what's she like?"

Walking his horse slowly toward the buildings, Barron felt a sudden doubt. He had traveled a couple of thousand miles to see a woman he did not know, a woman whose husband had died at his hands, and there was little logic in it. He supposed that it was a sense of guilt that had brought him to Texas. Perhaps he was more than a little in love with a picture. . . .

She appeared at the doorway of the adobe house as he reached the edge of the ranch yard, a tall, blond woman in a faded green gingham dress and an apron. She was about thirty, he judged, and much older than she had appeared in the photograph. She called a small boy to her. "Tommy, come here! Hurry!" He had been playing around a wagon at the side of the barn, a towheaded youngster of about four. He ran to her, held onto her hand, watched Barron gravely. The woman's eyes were not frightened, but he saw uneasiness in them. She obviously did not like strange riders coming up to her place. The butt of a small revolver protruded from the pocket of her apron.

Barron reined in, removed his hat. He fumbled for words. "How do you do?" he said. "I was passing by and saw your

buildings. I wonder if I could get a meal here?" The words sounded as false to his own ears as the ring of a counterfeit coin. "I would pay for the food, of course," he added.

Clara Naylor considered a moment, sizing him up.

"Well . . . all right."

"Thank you," Barron said, dismounting. "I appreciate it."

"You're an Easterner?"

"Yes. From Philadelphia. Do I seem like a tenderfoot?"

A little smile touched her lips. "You do," she said. "A rider from around these parts would say, 'How about a handout meal, ma'am?' He wouldn't offer to pay for it, and he wouldn't say thank you beforehand. You see, in the cattle country, no one is ever turned away hungry."

"I have a lot to learn," Barron said. Then, to the boy, "Hello, there, son. Your name is Tommy, isn't it? Mine's John Barron."

The boy remained grave and silent.

His mother said, "Say hello to Mr. Barron, son." And the boy said his hello in a small, shy voice.

"Come in, Mr. Barron," Clara said. "I have supper on the fire."

He followed her and the boy into a parlor that was poorly furnished, but spotlessly clean and homey. They went to the kitchen, and Barron hung his hat on a wall peg and seated himself on a chair against the wall. Clara set another place at the table. The revolver was gone from her apron pocket, and now lay on a shelf near the stove. She stirred something in a kettle on the stove.

She said, over her shoulder, "Stew. Does that sound appetizing, Mr. Barron?"

"Very."

"I'm Mrs. Naylor."

"I'm very glad to know you, Mrs. Naylor. You're very kind."

"You haven't been in Texas long?"

"I've only arrived," he said.

She was pale, a bit too thin, and there were blue smudges beneath her eyes. There was a sadness about her; a sadness that John Barron understood. But she was an attractive woman.

"I— Well, I've been thinking of going into the cattle business," he said. The lie sounded like a lie, he thought. "If I find one to my liking, I may invest in a ranch."

She turned to face him, a glow of excitement upon her face. "Heaven must have sent you, Mr. Barron," she said. "I have been thinking of selling the Bar N. I'm a widow, you see, and—" Her voice broke, and tears glistened in her eyes. "My husband trailed a herd to Dodge City, and never returned. I received a letter from the sheriff there. My husband was killed."

Barron squirmed mentally.

She added, "It was only three months ago. I'm still not used to being alone. . . . Do you think you would be interested in buying so small a ranch as the Bar N?"

It was a way to help her. Barron nodded. "It would have to be a small ranch," he said. "I'll look it over and—well, I won't be difficult to please."

"I'll ride out on the range with you tomorrow. It's too late today."

"That will be fine."

"It's good range, fine graze and plenty of water."

"I'm sure it is."

"But you will have to restock," she said. "There are only about twelve hundred head of cattle in the herd. You see—" She broke off abruptly, a shadow crossing her face. "Perhaps I should explain to you. I've been having a little trouble. My husband's brother has been taking cattle off the range and selling them. He can be rather difficult. He may object to my selling the ranch."

"But it's yours to sell, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, we'll take care of him if he makes trouble."

She looked at him as if she doubted him

suddenly, then turned back to her cooking. Nothing more was said about the ranch while she placed the food on the table, nor during the meal.

* * *

After they'd finished supper, Barron smoked a cigar and tried to make up with the boy while Clara cleared the table and washed the dishes. It was Barron's watch that finally got Tommy over his shyness. He ventured close when Barron took it out to see the time, saying, "My daddy had one. Let me listen." He smiled delightedly when the watch was held to his ear, and finally he permitted Barron to hold him on his knee.

Seeing that, Clara's eyes clouded. Barron realized that she was remembering times when the boy sat on his father's knee.

He put Tommy down, and rose. "I'd better move on," he said. "I'll come back in the morning and we'll look over the ranch and see what you think it's worth."

"You're leaving?"

"Well. . . . It seems that I should."

"You could put up in the bunkhouse."

"I will, and will be very glad to, since it's all right with you," he said gratefully.

He put his horse up in the corral, left his saddle on the corral fence, carried his bedroll to the small bunkhouse. A greasy deck of cards and an empty whiskey bottle lay upon the plank table, and there was an untidy heap of blankets on one of the eight bunks. Evidently Bart Naylor slept there occasionally.

Barron spread his blankets on one of the bunks, then sat and finished his cigar while dusk thickened into darkness and the room grew dim.

He had left the door open, and he could see across to the house. A lamp burned in the parlor.

He thought of Will Naylor, and he could not imagine a woman of such evident refinement and sensitive nature loving a

man like that. To Barron, Naylor had seemed a stupid brute. And he had been murderous by nature. But Clara must have seen him differently. She must have found some good in him.

He was unable to sleep after he turned in, and he lay thinking about her.

He'd known a number of women, of course, but not until now had he met one with whom he wanted to share his life. And it could not be, for if Clara ever found out that he was responsible for Will Naylor's death, she would hate him. She was fifteen years younger than he, too, and might not be interested in him. . . .

A hard drumming of hoofs woke him immediately after he dozed off. He sat up, looked out into the ranch yard. It was moonlight, and he could see the rider quite clearly. The man dropped from his horse, strode to the house, tried the door. It was barred. He swore aloud, then beat upon it with his fist.

Barron supposed it was Bart Naylor.

The man must have met Jess Maugher and learned from him that a stranger had asked the way to the Naylor ranch. A light came on in the parlor. Clara must have asked who was there, for the man shouted that it was Bart and demanded that she let him come in.

Barron began to dress in haste as Clara opened the door.

He might have trouble with this man. . . .

BARRON went to the corral and got his Winchester from his saddle, then he crossed to the house. The door was open, and he could hear Naylor's arrogant voice.

"You knew this Barron before you married Will, back in Missouri," Naylor raged. "You sent for him, damn you!"

He held Clara by the wrist and he must have been hurting her arm, for, when Barron reached the doorway, her face was drawn as if with pain.

"Take your hand off her, Naylor," Barron commanded.

The man let go of Clara and whirled, his hand going to his six-shooter. Then, seeing that he was covered, he froze.

"What's he want of you, Mrs. Naylor?" Barron asked.

"He wanted to know what you want. I told him that you were thinking of buying the Bar N and—well, he was mad clean through, like I told you he would be."

Bart was a blondish man, ruddy of complexion, with china-blue eyes. There was something boyish about him, and he was coarsely handsome, had none of Will's brutish look.

Barron said, "Why should you object to Mrs. Naylor selling the ranch if she gets a fair price? As Will Naylor's widow, she's now its owner, unless there was a will naming you as one of his heirs. Was there a will, Mrs. Naylor?"

"No."

"So that leaves you out of it, Naylor."

"The hell it does!" the man said savagely. "Will would expect me to take over the Bar N and look out for his wife and kid. He wouldn't want me to let some slicker come along and take the ranch away from her for only half what it's worth. And I'm not letting you!"

"You want to listen to more of this, Mrs. Naylor?" Barron asked.

"No," Clara said. "All I want is for him to leave me alone."

Barron gestured with the rifle. "You heard her," he said. "Clear out and don't come back. And on your way, don't try to draw your gun. I'm probably a better shot with a rifle than you are with a handgun."

"Maybe I'll give you a chance to prove that—later on."

"Get out!"

Naylor gave Clara a vicious look. "We'll see about this," he said. "There's something fishy about the whole business. I've a notion that you've taken up with this hombre—and Will only gone three months.

"I'll be back, and when I get here, he'd better be gone. You savvy?"

Clara said nothing. She was wearing a wrapper over her nightgown, and bedroom slippers. Her blond hair was prettily tousled. Despite her frightened look, she was more attractive now than at supper time.

Turning, keeping the rifle on the man, Barron followed him outside.

Naylor swung onto his horse, said, "I'm warning you, hombre. Don't be here when I get back." Then he wheeled away and rode out at a hard lope.

Barron turned and saw Clara standing in the doorway. She said, "I don't know what to do. This seemed my chance to get away from him. But now. . ."

"He wants the ranch, but he wants you more."

"Yes. Even when Will was alive, Bart would try to force himself on me when he found me alone with Tommy. He's bad clear through. He's not at all like my husband was. Will Naylor was a fine man, Mr. Barron."

Barron said nothing to that.

"Where did you plan to go, once you've sold the ranch?" he asked.

"My home was in Missouri," she said. "My parents are dead now, but I have a sister. I plan to go to her. -I—I hope he won't follow me there."

"I'll help you get to Missouri," Barron said. "Now go back to bed and don't worry about him. I doubt if he'll return tonight. If he does. . . Well, I'll be awake. Good night, Mrs. Naylor."

* * *

He slept little during the reminder of the night, but Bart Naylor did not return. In the morning, he washed up and shaved and then went to the house when he saw woodsmoke curling from its chimney. Clara saw him crossing the yard, and called, "Good morning, Mr. Barron. Come in.

I'll have breakfast ready very shortly."

He sat in the kitchen and watched her as she moved busily about preparing breakfast. She was dressed for their trip out across the range. She wore a mannish shirt, a divided riding skirt, cowpuncher boots. There was a bright green silk scarf about her neck. She looked lovely. There was an aching need in Barron to take her in his arms.

She was making flapjacks, and when she had a moment to look at him, she said, "I should apologize for what happened last night."

"You needn't apologize for something Bart Naylor did, Clara."

She looked at him with surprise at his use of her given name, which he'd done without conscious thought. "That's strange," she said. "I don't remember telling you my first name."

Barron felt a quick embarrassment. He said, "But you must have." He was deep in a lie, and felt guilty about it. "You don't mind if I call you that?"

"No. Of course not." She regarded him with bewilderment. "I have a strange feeling about you this morning, Mr. Barron. I don't understand—"

"Call me John, Clara, won't you?"

"John. . . It isn't easy for me."

"You told me that you felt as though we had known each other a long time," he said. "So it shouldn't be difficult. Or don't you feel that way this morning?"

"I—I don't know."

"Don't have any doubts about me. I mean you no harm."

"Last night Bart Naylor said that you stopped in Mike Hanlon's saloon at Burnt Timbers and asked the way to the Naylor ranch," she said. "If he told the truth, then you knew about the Bar-N—and about me."

He shook his head, and expanded his lie. "Bart was mistaken," he said. It hurt him to lie to her, but he could see no way to tell her the truth.

"I'm from Philadelphia, Clara. I've been in Texas but a little while. He smiled. "And I do intend to buy your ranch if you're still of a mind to sell."

She said nothing more, but he could see that she was not satisfied. She had her doubts of him; perhaps she felt that he was lying. But she wasn't afraid of him. He was glad of that.

CHAPTER THREE

Six-guns Talk

THEY ate breakfast in silence, then Clara suggested that he saddle the horses while she got Tommy from bed and dressed and fed him. He went out to the corral and saddled his roan, and then found a saddle in the barn and rigged in on a chestnut gelding which was one of the four Bar N horses in the pen. It took him quite a while; for he had difficulty in catching both the roan and the chestnut. Using a lariat was not one of his accomplishments, and he found himself thinking, I'll have to learn. . . . The thought surprised him. It was as though he was turning into a rancher just because he was buying the Bar N to help Clara Naylor.

Then, as he waited over by the house with the horses, he asked himself, "Why not?" He liked this great sprawling country that was Texas. He might like the cattle business, once he learned what it was all about. He had spent more than twenty years in industry, but during the past year he had grown restless. It had been his restlessness, a sort of boredom, that had taken him to Dodge City to embark on a buffalo hunt. It occurred to him now that he needed new horizons. The challenge of a new way of life. His business could get along without him; he had trained his assistants well. . . .

He must give this idea some consideration, he decided.

He held Tommy before him on his saddle

when they rode out, and the boy made Barron acutely aware of how empty his life was. True, his business associates and so-called friends were legion, but he should have married and had a family—at least a son like Tommy.

He stole a look at Clara.

"What are you thinking, John?" she asked.

"May I really tell you?"

"Why not?"

"I was thinking that you and Tommy are pretty wonderful."

She was almost gay at the moment.

"Why, thank you!" she said, laughing.

They topped a rise and saw small bunches of cattle in the distance.

Clara said, "There should be more. But I'm sure that Bart Naylor and the Maughers have driven off at least five hundred head."

"You should have gone to the law, Clara."

"Yes. But the nearest lawman is at Wellsville, and that's so far away."

"These Maughers. Are they outlaws?"

"I don't know if they're wanted by the law," Clara said. "But Will always said that there was nothing too bad for them to do. He tried to keep Bart from traveling with them, but—well, Bart is wild and wouldn't listen. Will wouldn't admit it, but I think he was afraid of them. Sometimes I think it that it must have been Luke Maugher who killed him."

Barron was silent a moment, then asked, "What makes you think that?"

"Will wrote to me from Dodge City, after he sold his trail-herd and was about to start back home," Clara said, her gayety gone and her voice bleak. The letter said that he'd seen Luke Maugher in Dodge and he feared that all three of them were there—and that they'd followed him and planned to rob him of his cattle money. It said that he was taking no chances, and so was giving his money to an acquaintance, a man named Bortner, who has a ranch

near Wellsville. Bortner was to deposit the money to my husband's account at the Wellsville bank."

"Did this Bortner deposit the money, Clara?"

"Yes. I was notified of the deposit. Or rather the notice came in the mail in my husband's name," she said. "I never told Bart, because I feared that he'd try to force me to withdraw the money and give some of it to him. I think that Will was right in thinking that Luke Maugher meant to rob him. He was wrong only in that the other Maughers weren't with Luke. Russ and Jess were around here, with Bart Naylor. I think Luke killed Will, thinking that Will was carrying the cattle money."

"Where is Luke Maugher now?"

"He never returned here."

Barron puzzled over what she told him, then it happened—because of Tommy. The boy was talking about Barron's watch, saying, "I want to hear it tick," and, small boy fashion, he squirmed in Barron's arms and, quick as a flash, slipped a pudgy little hand into his shirt pocket. And brought out Clara's photograph. A sense of shock went through Barron. He held Tommy with one hand and the roan's reins with the other, and so he could not retrieve the photograph. It was too late, for Tommy cried, "Look, Mama— Look at the pretty lady!"

Clara said rebukingly, "Oh, Tommy, you mustn't!" Then she recognized the photograph. She reined in her horse and stared at Barron. There was a look of horror in her eyes as the truth dawned on her.

"How," she said brokenly, "how did you get that?"

Barron looked at her in an agonized way, then shook his head and said, "Don't make me tell, Clara." But he knew as he spoke the words that he must tell her everything now. She had a right to know. And when she knew, she would hate him.

He told her about it. He told her how

he had happened to be in Kansas, and how he had encountered Will Naylor after he'd set out for Dodge City and lost his way.

She cried, "No, it's not true!" when he told how Naylor had been about to shoot him in the back. And she wouldn't listen when he explained why he had come to Texas seeking her.

"It's all a lie!" she said, her voice bordering on hysteria. "You're not what you claim. I don't know what you want here, unless it's to cheat the widow and child of the man you murdered. You're worse than Bart Naylor and the Maughers!" She swung her horse close to his. "Give me my son," she said, and now she was sobbing.

She took Tommy from him, hugged him to her, then turned back toward the ranch headquarters. Barron wheeled his roan about, but then thought better of following her. It was ended as he should have known it would end. The charitable thing for him to do would be clear out of her life, even though it meant that from today on his life would be empty. He would not be able to forget her, nor Tommy either.

He tried to tell himself that even if the truth hadn't come out, Clara could have meant nothing to him. Yet he couldn't quite believe it. There had been something in the way she looked at him and in her voice when she spoke to him that revealed a measure of interest in him as a possible suitor. She had been attracted to him. If only it had been Luke Maugher who killed Will Naylor. . . . But that was an absurd line of reasoning, for if Will had not died by his hand he would never have known that Clara existed.

He took out a cigar and bit off the nub savagely. The anger in him had no target, unless it was directed at Fate for having played such a trick upon him. He lighted the cigar, but after a few puffs he flung it from him. He lifted the roan's reins and headed toward Burnt Timbers.

He let the roan choose its own gait, and so it was midday when he passed through

the little settlement. The fat proprietor of the combination store and saloon appeared at the barroom door, eyeing him curiously.

He rode on, following the road toward Wellsville, where he would take the stage back to Fort Worth and then board the train that would carry him on out of Texas.

It was late afternoon and he was far beyond Burnt Timbers, when enlightenment came. He recalled Clara having said, "Sometimes I think it must have been Luke Maugher who killed him." The words filled him with a sudden excitement. He reined in, wondering if it was possible that Luke Maugher had killed Will Naylor.

It was possible, and he must find out if it was so.

He turned the roan about and lifted it to a lope, and, an hour and a half later, came into Burnt Timbers, where he dropped from the saddle in front of Mike Hanlon's place. He strode into the saloon and found the fat man talking to a sombreroed Mexican. Mike eyed him oddly.

"I thought I saw you riding toward Wellsville, friend."

"You did," Baron said. "But something important brought me back. Mike, what did Will Naylor look like?"

"Well, I don't know. . ."

"Think, man. It's important!"

"You ever see his brother Bart?"

"Yes. Last night."

"Well, Will looked quite a bit like Bart," Mike said. "Only he was five, six years older and looked it. He was more solemn. He was no hell-raiser like Bart. He was on the skinny side, and I joked with him a time or two and asked him if his wife wasn't a good cook. . . Yeah, he was as lean as a longhorn steer on a poor range. His hair wasn't as light as Bart's—sandy colored, it was—but he had blue eyes like his brother."

"And Luke Maugher," Barron said. "He was older than Will, about my age? A stocky man with a heavy face and a dark complexion. Was Luke like that, Mike?"

The fat man looked puzzled. "That

description fits Luke, all right," he said. "But what do you mean 'was'? Is he dead, too?"

Barron said, "I'll explain when I see you again, Mike," and turned away.

He ran out to his horse, swung to the saddle, struck out for the Bar N Ranch. He could face Clara now, for it was not he but Luke Maugher who had killed Will Naylor. And somehow he must convince Clara of that!

IT WAS full dark when he approached the ranch buildings, and the windows of the little adobe house glowed with lamp-light. He dismounted before the house and knocked on the door. When Clara opened the door, he said, "I've got to talk to you, Clara. You've got to be fair and give me a hearing.

"I was nearly to Wellsville when I realized what happened three months ago in Kansas," he said. "I swear that this is the truth, Clara. I can't lie to you again. Believe that. And none of the untruths I did speak were intended to harm you. I came here because I fell in love with your photograph. And now I'm in love with the real you. Maybe it seems ridiculous to you, but—well, that's how it is. And loving you, I can't hurt you."

"You must be mad!"

"No, Clara. Falling in love with you is as sane as anything I ever did," he told her. "I told you how I met Will Naylor when I got lost on my way to Dodge City. I told you he tried to kill me—that I killed him instead. It wasn't Will Naylor. I realize that now."

She stared at him uncertainly.

"I thought it was Will Naylor because of the letter I found in the wallet I took off the man's body after I killed him," he went on. "A letter you'd written to your husband. It was a natural mistake. But the man I killed was Luke Maugher. He was a man about my age, Clara—which made him quite a bit older than Will. He was a thick-

bodied man, swarthy of complexion. He was a tough, stupid man—and he reminded me of a brute. After coming here and seeing you, I should have realized that you wouldn't have been married to such a man.

"Will feared that Luke planned to attempt to rob him when he left Dodge City," he went on. "He believed that the other two Maughers were also in Dodge. So he sent his cattle money to Texas with a friend, then set out with only a little money in his wallet. So, somewhere between Dodge and Texas, Luke Maugher did attempt to rob him. Luke must have shot him from ambush, killed him. But all he found on Will's dead body was his wallet and the small amount of money it contained. He kept the wallet. Then, later, Luke encountered me—and tried to murder me. I saved myself by killing him."

He looked at her pleadingly. "That's how it was, Clara. I killed the man who murdered your husband. Can you believe me?"

Then from behind Barron, Bart Naylor said, "I believe you, hombre. And Russ and Jess Maugher will sure believe that you killed Luke."

Barron swung around, and Bart was grinning wickedly. He had his gun in his hand, and it was leveled at Barron.

"I heard you ride in," he said. "I In-jumped over here as soon as you stepped inside, and I heard the pretty speech you made to her. Telling her how much you love her, and she a widow only three months!"

Clara cried, "Bart! Bart, please—"

He spoke to her without taking his gaze off Barron. "Quit worrying," he told her. "I'm not going to kill him. Naw . . . I'm going to let Jess and Russ do that."

She took a forward step. "Bart, listen," she said. "Let him go. I—he means nothing to me, but I don't want murder done."

"And give him a chance to come back with the law, maybe?" Bart said. "Nothing doing."

"Bart—" Clara pleaded, and moved toward him.

He yelled, "Don't get between me and him!" He lashed out his left arm and shoved her violently away.

Barron leaped at him.

He got past Bart's gun, slammed into the man's body. The gun went off, its roar thunderous in the small room. Bart Naylor reeled backward under the impact of Barron's hurtling weight, and fell out of the doorway. Barron dropped atop him, and the man's breath puffed from him. In the moment that Bart lay gasping and helpless, Barron smashed a fist to his face. He felt the jolt all the way to his shoulder, and he felt Bart go limp beneath him.

He jumped up and ran to his horse, and he heard a yell from the bunkhouse as he jerked his Winchester from its saddle boot. Whirling, he saw the Maughers come running from the bunkhouse, their six-shooters out.

Jess shouted an oath. "It's that hombre back again! He's killed Bart!"

Barron realized that he was silhouetted against the lighted doorway, a perfect target, and he darted away from the house as the Maughers opened fire. He heard the shriek of slugs, and then he dropped to the ground to make a more difficult target of himself. He drove a shot at Jess Maugher who, seeing Barron drop, had leaped forward with a jubilant yelp in the belief that their quarry had been hit.

Barron's shot missed, but it served to scare Jess into beating a hasty retreat. The man swerved toward the barn, took cover at the side of it. Barron drove a shot at the other Maugher, and he drew back into the bunkhouse and fired twice from its doorway. Barron swung his rifle toward Jess, and waited. When Jess exposed himself to fire, Barron drove his shot home. Jess screamed, sprawled on the ground. He lay there moaning.

A gun behind Barron opened up, its first slug kicking dirt into his face and

its second catching him as he jumped to his feet, hitting him in the left side. It was like the blow of a giant fist, staggering him and causing his knees to buckle. It was Bart Naylor who shot him, and Naylor, now rising, was aiming another shot.

Barron tried to steady himself. Everything was spinning crazily for him. He shook his head and with great effort brought his rifle to his shoulder. He squeezed out his shot as Bart's revolver cracked, and somehow hit his mark while the other man's aim was wild. Bart Naylor fell to his knees, tried to keep from falling farther. But he must have known it was no use, for after a moment he cursed Barron. And then he fell forward and lay still.

Barron jacked another cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber, turned to face the bunkhouse doorway. Russ Maugher was still in the building, but no shot came from there. Barron called to him, told him to come out with his hands up.

"You may as well, Maugher!" he shouted. "Bart's done for, and so is Jess!"

Russ Maugher obeyed, evidently not realizing how close to collapse Barron was. He'd left his gun inside, and he held his empty hands shoulder high.

"Get your horse and clear out," Barron told him.

Then Jess Maugher gasped, "Russ, don't leave me here! I've got a slug in my leg! Don't leave me, Russ! You hear?" Both Maughers had lost their nerve.

Russ looked at Barron.

Barron said, "Take him with you, And Bart's body too." He went and leaned against the wall of the house, still keeping his rifle in readiness. "Get the horses first, then come and get these two."

IT TOOK some little while for Russ Maugher to get the horses at the corral, saddle them, then help Jess mount. The two of them would have cleared out without the dead Bart Naylor had not Barron

threatened to shoot Russ. Finally Russ got Bart's body across the saddle of one of the horses, and tied in place. After that he rode out, leading the horse carrying the dead man and followed by the wounded Jess.

The Maughers left without so much as making threats against Barron.

Clara had come from the house to stand beside Barron. It was she who kept him from collapsing when the Maughers were gone. She helped him into the house and had him lie upon her bed. She doctored his wound, cleansing the torn flesh over his left ribs with carbolic solution, and then bandaging him heavily to support his cracked ribs. She was calm, unaffected by the sight of blood, and skillful. Finally she dosed him with enough brandy to put him to sleep.

He woke once during the night and found her sitting in a rocking-chair. The lamp was turned low, and there was only enough light for him to make out her features. He couldn't tell what her expression was.

"You're keeping watch," he said "because you think the Maughers will come back?"

"They won't come back, now that Bart is dead," she said. "I— Well, I thought that you might wake and need me." She seemed a little embarrassed.

Barron said, "I need you, Clara. Now— always. And I think you need me. You and Tommy. Can you believe what I told you tonight—about it having been Luke Maugher who killed Will?"

She nodded.

"You'll marry me, Clara?"

She rose and crossed to the bed. She stood there looking down at him, her face grave. "Perhaps I shall some day, John," she said. "When I can think of marrying again without being disrespectful to the memory of my husband. If you feel that you can wait. . . ."

"I'd have it no other way," he said, and was content. ★ ★ ★

By
**KENNETH L.
SINCLAIR**



"Hey! You're that Good-Time Charlie skunk!"

Good-Time Charlie

What Charlie did to the town of Tarantula to prove that he was plumb serious, was no laughing matter. . . . Least of all, to Charlie!

GOOD-TIME Charlie Jones did not mean no harm to man nor critter. Long's he stayed home up in Maverick Basin he made out fine, having neighbors who knew him well and savvied the reason for his nickname. Which they should, them being the ones who hung it

on him. But when he jogged down to the big, wicked, three-saloon town of Tarantula in search of several items such as stocker cattle, a haircut, and a wife, he ran himself right into trouble.

Folks down here knew him by name if not by sight, having heard all about how he'd been jumped by a much wanted outlaw and had been obliged to subdue the hombre by shooting him in the leg. And then had to stand up to the local sheriff, who tried to grab the reward money after Charlie'd taken the chances. Seemed like folks down here knew—or thought they knew—a heap more than that about him, though. Barber locked up his shop, right in Charlie's face. Storekeepers took up worried stands in front of their plate-glass windows when he passed by. Saloonkeepers went at it differently—they beamed at him and told him to come right in, mentioning that their stocks of whiskey could stand considerable of a drain. He'd told them to let it age awhile longer, till he got his business settled.

Man wanted to be cold sober for the part of it that was left. He'd bought his cattle and he'd given up on that brave barber. . . .

But the way folks high-stepped out of his path, and then nudged each other and turned to stare at him, purt' near made him edgy. He got it figured out, though; they'd been deceived by his name, and it seemed like they expected him to go swaggering down the street with a blonde on each arm and a bottle on each hip, shooting glass to flinders and raising hell generally.

Sad to tell, Charlie's appearance nudged the misunderstanding along. He hadn't been out of the hills all summer, and had hair enough for two. Besides which he was a rakishly built young buck with an impudent grin and a roving eye.

The eye was roving a-purpose, now, to pick that bride. Passel of gals in Tarantula, who just happened to be strolling in their prettiest dresses, had batted their eye-winkers at him. Right this minute there were three fillies across the street from him, one

as pretty as the other—man might's well walk right up to the one in the middle and ask her to marry him. Being an hombre who liked to get at a chore once his mind was set to it, Charlie started right over there.

Maybe he was watching those gals more than he was watching where he was going. Anyhow, he bumped slap-dah into Miss Prudence Pennyweather and she toppled from the walk and landed in the dust with a bump.

He didn't know her name then, but found it out pronto. She was little, but the noise she made wasn't. She said, "Why, you blind, blundering lunkhead, why don't you look before you make a swerve like that? Why don't you— Hey! You're that Good-Time Charlie skunk!"

Being called a skunk on-such short acquaintance startled Charlie some. He'd stepped off the walk to give her a hand, but now he reined up.

"I'm Prudence Pennyweather," she informed him, getting up and dusting some of Tarantula's street from her levis and shirt. "Dad and I just got into town, and the station agent told us what you looked like. Dad's waiting for you down at the pens where the cattle are, and he's got his sawed-off loaded with buckshot, both barrels. I don't want him to get started killing people at his age, so I'm warning you to stay away from there!"

"Whoa!" Charlie said. "Happens them cows are my property—"

"Happens they're not!" The filly, who looked to be about nineteen and made an hombre want to look some more, blew a lock of raven-black hair away from one of the bluest eyes he'd yet seen. "All you did was rustle them—or pay somebody to do it and drive them up here from our place."

Charlie's jaw took on a stubborn tilt. "Don't you try runnin' no slippery deal on me, gal," he warned. "I paid for them critters an' I got a receipt. Right here. . . . Uh, some'ers. . . ." He pulled the pocket

of his shirt wide open so he could peer down into it. No receipt. Must have lost the cussed thing.

"Hah!" the girl said, putting tanned little fists to her hips. "I thought so! I'll bet you have to keep on the jump with your rustling, to get money enough for all your fancy capering!"

It was enough to make a man plumb forget his better nature, getting accused of things like that. So Charlie thought what the hell, might's well find out what this here rampagin' is like, and he reached out and grabbed her. She caught her breath and went to squirming and kicking. Charlie didn't know exactly what to do, but he had to do something to save his shins, so he swung her up and perched on his shoulder and clamped an arm across those active little boots.

SHE knocked his hat askew. He captured one of her arms—and by that time he was going along pretty fast, toward the stock pens at the railroad side of town, and she got to worrying about a fall. But she shouted, "You put me down!"

Charlie grinned and swerved toward the town water trough. The gal clamped her free arm under his chin and gasped, "Don't you dare!" He pried the arm loose enough so he could breathe and went on.

At the pens a wolf-lean, dried-out old codger—must have been all of forty-five—stamped out with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands, demanding, "What's this, now?"

"It's that darn rustler!" the girl cried. "He's crazy! Dad, make him put me down!"

Charlie put her down, and she faced around to him indignantly, tucking her shirttails in and breathing in gulps. Looking at her, Charlie came near to breathing the same way.

So he blinked his eyes and looked over to the cattle, drouth gaunted and generally a sorry-looking outfit, that were eating the hay he'd bought for them. "Seems there's

been a mixup here," he said. "I'm Charlie Jones, Mr. Pennyweather. Got me a brand-new homestead up in Maverick Basin, an' plenty good graze, an' no cows. So I bought these—"

"From who?" Pennyweather demanded.

"From a widow lady, name of Mrs. Parker. I had some money because an outlaw feller come through the basin in some of a hurry an' decided I had a fast-lookin' horse an' went to take it from me. I never was no bounty hunter, but he made me mad. Took most of the thousand dollars I collected on him to pay the widow, but I got the cattle cheap because they was in bad shape, an' she said—"

"Huh!" Prudence put in. "I'll bet she was a young one!"

Matter of fact, she'd been just that. Likely she'd left town, though, on the weekly mixed train that had chuffed out earlier this afternoon. She'd been red-headed, and what he could see of her through her lace veil had been pretty. She'd told him that her late husband had had a ranch on the lower ranges, which were dried out this year, and he'd been trying to make a drive to the mountains in search of better range when he'd come down with something and died. The condition of the stock sure had borne that out. And the brand—Slash P—had seemed all right. Plenty of ranchers made their brand out of the first letter of their last names.

Now Pennyweather was lowering his sawed-off and saying, "Young feller, you been roped in. These here cows are mine, happen so. Our grass dried up an' Penny an' me made a gather, havin' heard there was good graze up above. Couldn't figure how to make the drive, though, bein' too broke to hire cowhands. Then one mornin' the stock was gone, an' though brush had been dragged over the trail we managed to follow it here. What you better do is go lookin' for that widow."

"Sweet-talk her," Prudence advised. "Maybe she'll give your money back on

account of the way you wear your hair. It sure makes you look rambunctious."

"Prue, you quit sassin' him," Pennyweather warned. "Can't you see he's been sore wounded an' needs sympathy?"

She sniffed. "He had it coming. A good-time cowboy. Goes around carrying girls on his shoulder—I'm surprised he didn't have a couple of blondes perched there when I first saw—"

"You got a receipt for that payment?" Pennyweather asked pointedly.

"Did have," Charlie admitted. All of a sudden he was recalling the pair of drunks who'd come out of the Frisky Spurs saloon and had seemed to take him for some long-lost friend of theirs, jostling him and hanging onto him like ticks. He'd shaken them off and had thought no more about it. But he was doing plenty of thinking about it now—one of those hombres must have lifted the receipt from his pocket.

His jaw tightened and he said, "I'll be seein' you folks later. There's somethin' I've got to do an' right now's a good time to be gettin' at it."

His boot heels were hitting the sidewalk planks pretty hard when he approached the Frisky Spurs. But old Gedney was watering his horse at the trough, and Charlie pulled up, staring. "What you doin' in this nest of snakes, Ed?"

Gedney was a salty little old-timer who'd taken up the homestead next to Charlie's. Having more money than most of the settlers, he'd been able to stock his range right off. And a liking for bright lights and activity pulled him down to Tarantula pretty often.

"Come to give you a hand with drivin' your stock," Gedney said. "Figgered you'd had time to conclude your business by now. Though I don't see no haircut an' I don't see no wife."

"No stock either," Charlie told him. He looked at the oldster's leathery, too-damn-innocent face in quick suspicion. "Was it you that told it tall around here, about me

bein' the galoot that pries up hell an' then kicks the blocks from under just to see it fall?"

Ed couldn't have looked any guiltier if he'd had his hand caught in a cash drawer. He said, "Shucks, they wasn't any harm in makin' you out to be a lively young buck—figgered it'd attract attention, help you catch a filly. All I done was mention that you was a whizzer with the ladies an' that when you went on a toot you was hell on mirror glass. Stretched the truth some, but a young feller with a thousand bucks to spend wants a run for his money."

"What I got," Charlie said darkly, "was a run-around." He told Ed what had happened.

The oldster did some swearing and looked around at the tiny depot. "Train's gone out—you've had you a high-priced lesson an' it's my fault, mostly. Should of knowed that a young buck who's spent the summer cuttin' poles in the basin would be an easy mark. Should of come with you at the start, to guide your falterin' footsteps in the world of women."

"Ed," Charlie said with a grin, "you talk too damn much. I got me a hunch, now, that the lady didn't board that train. Pains was took to get my receipt off me, an' the hombres that took it come out of the Frisky Spurs. I'm headed there now."

Old Ed hitched at his cartridge belt and said, "I ain't goin' to be very far behind."

When they entered the saloon Ed had his hat brim pulled down low over his eyes and his jaw had a truculent tilt. But the saloon was plumb quiet. The barkeep was wiping glass, and two out-of-work punchers from the lower ranges were easing in on the free lunch, and a fallow-faced gambler with black sleeve-guards and green eyeshade was practising with his faro layout.

The barkeep and the gambler looked at the newcomers hopefully. But Charlie, not seeing the hombres who had jostled him, saw a door marked OFFICE at the landing of the stairway and went up there, spurs jin-

gling. Charlie's sudden friends had come out of this saloon, and it was his guess that the boss-man might know about the whole goings-on. Not bothering to knock, Charlie went in.

The hombre who sat behind the desk was right handsome, with a thin mustache and sideburns that made curving arcs on his cheeks. There was a whoppin' pile of money on the desk, and perched right beside it was the gal who'd called herself Lila Parker.

She didn't look much like a widow now. No veil, and her dress had no sleeves and no shoulders either. What there was of it was all spangled and fitted her right snug. She slid off the desk and faced Charlie, her green eyes pried wide by alarm. "You—" she said.

"Yup," Charlie said, "it's me, all right. That there veil wasn't thick enough to keep me from gettin' a look at your purty face. It's one a man'd remember any time."

She lifted one shoulder. "Well, if you're not going to be a gentleman about it—Brett, this is the cowboy—"

The hombre behind the desk didn't seem ruffled a bit. He leaned back in his chair, biting the end of a fresh cigar, and said, "Selmer's the name, cowboy. I understand you made a deal for some cattle. What's the matter, aren't they all right?"

"They're fine an' dandy, if they don't keel over before they can be gotten up to good grass. Your steal would of worked out neat if I'd took them critters right out of town. Had some other matters to attend to, though. Meanwhile the real owner of the cattle showed up."

Selmer took the unlighted cigar from his mouth. He and the girl exchanged sudden, alarmed glances.

"Makes it awkward, don't it?" Charlie observed, drawing his gun and moving up to the desk. "I'll take my money back an' let you explain things to the hombre you stole the cows from."

But there was a heap of activity in that room, all at once. Selmer nodded to some-

body in the doorway, jerky-like. Old Ed Gedney let out a yip of warning. Charlie wheeled around but something belted him on the side of the head and the room went up slantwise. Ed was putting up the best battle he could, against the gambler and two-three other hombres. The barkeep and some more of them swarmed onto Charlie. Must be, he thought distantly, that they'd come up the stairs quiet-like and listened at the door.

He heard Lila yell something, and then there was a big jolt and he keeled over. The last thing he saw was all that money coming up at him, and his face plowed into it. Couldn't do a thing about it, though. . . .

RIGHT after that, seemed like, somebody was gently dabbing at his face with a cool damp cloth. His head was buzzing and felt like it might go sailing off from the rest of him any minute. The sky was full of stars and there was a lantern on the ground beside him. His head was resting in Prudence Pennyweather's lap and she was looking down at him with her blue eyes brimming with anxiety.

Her pa and old Ed, who looked considerably battered, were squatting beside one of the cattle pens nearby, each trying to out-talk the other. Pennyweather didn't have much chance.

"Now, Charlie," said Prudence, "you hold still. You're all bashed up and your face is a sight."

He felt of his face and decided she hadn't told it wrong. She'd mopped most of the dried blood away, but there were some lumps that would be black in the morning if they weren't already. "Don't seem to recall comin' down here," he mentioned.

"Indeed you wouldn't! They tossed you and Mr. Gedney out in the alley, and he wobbled down here for help, and the three of us carried you. Charlie, you've had a terrible beating."

He grinned up at her. She'd done something to her hair, so that her dainty ears

were showing, and there was a ribbon in it that matched the color of her eyes. "Worth it, though," he said, "to wake up an' find a purty gal—"

"Oh!" she cried, jumping up. "It is, is it? Well, Mr. Good-Time Charlie, next time I'll just let one of your other gals pick you up! I'll bet you've got lots of 'em!"

What he-hombre could deny a thing like that, even if it wasn't strictly true? He got to his feet, aching all over, and tottered to where old Ed and Mr. Pennyweather were. He asked, "Seen any of that saloon bunch around here?"

"None that we've noticed," Ed said. "Why?"

Charlie got Mr. Pennyweather's sawed-off from where it leaned against the fence and sank down cross-legged. "Why you think? Havin' the owner of these cows show up has put Selmer's tail in the door hinge. We'd best stand watch all night."

Prudence sniffed. "Another ruckus would be his idea of a good time," she observed to nobody in particular.

"Yup," Charlie said. "I just dote on gettin' myself slammed around."

Selmer made no move that night, though. Over the breakfast fire there was an argument about what should be done. Pennyweather and Prudence were all for going to the sheriff. Charlie wasn't. "The hombre's a crook," he said. "Tried to do me out of that reward. An' Selmer wouldn't be pullin' off any deal raw as this one without the law was in on it. You folks keep watch here while I browse around town some."

He gave the town a careful once-over. He went into several places of business, telling the wary proprietors, "There's a meetin' at the general store in ten minutes. You be there." Coming from him, that startled them some—but he gave them no time for questions.

When he'd finished the rounds he went to the big store himself. A pimply-faced kid was spinning the big red wheels of the coffee grinder, and the owner of the place, a

burly hombre by name of Kelly, was up on a stepladder arranging bolts of yard goods on the shelves. Kelly came down and eyed Charlie's bruised face worriedly and asked, "Somethin' you wanted?"

"Yup. Box of forty-five shells."

When Kelly slid the shells across the counter he said, "This is a quiet town, Jones. I hope you ain't goin' to—"

"It's quiet, for a fact," Charlie said. "What I'm aimin' to do is set by your cracker barrel there for a spell."

While the proprietor stared, Charlie sat him down by the cracker barrel, munched a few, and filled the empty loops of his cartridge belt with shiny new shells.

The harnessmaker and the town blacksmith came in together. The blacksmith rubbed his palms on his leather apron, and said, "Where at's this here meetin', Kelly? Feller come by an' told us—"

"Right over here, gents," Charlie called, getting up and strapping his gunbelt about his lean hips. "I'm the one that's callin' it. Reason I picked you hombres is that you've each got a stake in this town. Be kind of bad if the place dried up an' went to seed. . . ."

"What are you gettin' at, cowboy?" Kelly demanded.

Other businessmen had crowded in behind the first arrivals. And now the sheriff, who'd no doubt seen them all heading this way, came in and eased up to the group around the cracker barrel, craning his neck to see. This star-polisher was a potbellied little hombre by name of Hasker Dwight, with a beer-foam-strainer mustache and a red nose. He narrowed his puffy eyes when he saw Charlie, not having forgotten the time he'd tried to bluff Charlie out of that reward.

"Now that we're all here," Charlie said, aiming a mocking grin at the sheriff, "I can tell you just what I'm gettin' at. There's a bunch of rustled cattle down in the loadin' pens in this here town. They ain't for shipment—the idea was to sell 'em to some

rancher. An' that was done, me bein' the easy mark. But the cattle's owner showed up an' put a crimp in things, an' now your man Selmer, who had 'em rustled, is in a right bad light.

"Reflects back onto you, seems like. Thing like this could give a town a bad name. Word gets around among cow folks like a grass fire, an' if everybody up above was to take the idea this place was a nest of thieves they'd likely drive their stock out to market the other way, over the mountains to Bowie. Seems as though their trade would go that way too."

The businessmen exchanged alarmed glances. "How do we know you're tellin' it straight?" Kelly asked.

"You'll just have to take the word of a stockman," Charlie said blandly. "Same as the folks up in Maverick Basin will do. Now where do you suppose that sheriff's meanderin' to?"

Dwight had slipped quietly from the store. Someone went to the front windows and said, "Blame 'f he ain't goin' straight to Selmer's place!"

Kelly aimed a forefinger at his helper. "You go fetch Judge Halloran, kid. If he ain't up yet, fetch him in his nightshirt!" He peered at all those shiny new shells in Charlie's gunbelt as Charlie headed for the door. "Wait a minute now, cowboy! Don't you go cuttin' loose any wolf—this has got to be acted on legal an' proper."

"That a fact?" Charlie asked mildly. "Feller's liable to let that slip his mind, when he's been clipped so short the wind chills him. Me, I always did figure the way to make good time at cleanin' out a nest of snakes was to get right at it. You fellers can run your debatin' society any way you take the notion!"

Charlie stepped out into the bright sunshine, a gaunt and shaggy he-wolf from the mountains, checking the loads in his six-gun as he went. When he reached the porch of the Frisky Spurs, he slid the weapon back into its holster. But then he got

stopped by Lila, who came running along the walk and grabbed his arm.

"You crazy cowboy!" she breathed. "Are you fixing to get yourself killed?"

"Now, what give you that idea?" Charlie asked.

"The way you were giving your gun the once-over. The look you've got on your fool face. Mister, they'll cut you to pieces!"

"Might," Charlie said. "Took me out some insurance, though. Your gentleman friend can't have me killed without gettin' himself in mighty bad with the rest of this here town. He's been worried about that before, ain't he? Got him kind of stopped, I reckon."

"You just think it has! Brett will—"

"Say," Charlie asked, tilting his head to look down at her, "is that there beauty spot real, or just put on? Seems like it moves around some from day to day."

Her green eyes flashed. "You really *are* crazy!" Her hand squeezed his arm. "Look here, cowboy, I—I'll get your money back for you. You go to the livery and hire a nice buggy and I'll meet you in ten minutes. We'll take a ride down River Road—"

"Kind of early in the day," Charlie observed dryly, "for buggy-ridin' down there. Besides, I already got my mind set on another gal. Seems like you're as worried as ol' Brett is. . . ."

"All right, then! Go ahead and get shot!" She stepped away from him, drawing herself up and bringing her handbag around to the front of her.

A man couldn't be sure what was in that handbag. Might be a derringer that could get him in the back when he approached the saloon. Charlie grabbed her, pinning her arms to her sides, and carried her along the walk in spite of her wiggling and screaming.

"Ain't exactly a case of havin' a blonde on each arm," he said, "but it'll do for this time!" He dumped her into the town water trough. She made a big splash; and while she was threshing around in there

he grabbed her handbag and gave it a toss into the high weeds of a vacant lot.

When he turned back to the saloon, the sheriff was there, standing between the doors like he wished he was somewhere else. Dwight had his gun out, but it wobbled some. He took a deep breath. "Jones, you're disturbin' the peace, manhandlin' Miss Lila like you done. I got to take you in."

"You'll have a time," Charlie predicted.

THE sheriff started forward. But storeman Kelly's voice called from across the street, saying, "Dwight, you got no authority to make any arrest. Judge Halloran's just removed you from office, temporary, till we can get to the bottom of this."

The sheriff seemed to shrink down. He licked his lips, then peered across the street and then sent a glance over his shoulder into the saloon. He holstered his gun and took out down the walk at a lumbering run.

Charlie nodded thanks to Kelly and saw that the storeman had come out with a brand-new scattergun on his arm. Behind him the other businessmen were filing out of the store, all of them armed with guns from Kelly's stock. New guns, old faces—they looked plumb grim.

"You pull out of this, Jones," Kelly directed. "You got the ball to rollin' an' now Tarantula aims to—"

"Nope," Charlie said. "Might be you'd go to debatin'. Selmer had me beat up an' I figure he's my turkey—besides which, I got near a thousand dollars in this place some'ers." He turned and flung the doors wide and went into the saloon.

Brett Selmer was waiting for him, there in the cool gloom. The sideburned hombre was leaning his back against the bar and his gleaming teeth were clamped about a fresh cheeroot. The barkeep was down at the far end of the mahogany, keeping his hands out of sight. The gambler was sitting at his faro bank and his hands were out of sight too. Four other hombres, all

tough-looking and openly armed, were scattered about the room. One of them had been at the window—he turned from it now, saying, "Brett, they're startin' across the street. The whole caboodle of 'em!"

Selmer dismissed that with a wave of his hand, keeping his eyes fixed on Charlie's face. "Well, cowboy," he said. "You're quite a joker, aren't you?"

Charlie didn't say anything, right off. A cold tightness was spreading along his nerves. If it was left strictly up to them, those townsmen would likely fall to arguing and get nothing done. But with somebody showing the way, they'd follow. A man did what he had to do; but if any good-time hombre had the notion there was fun to be had in gunfights and such, he was downright loco.

Charlie said, "I come for my money, an' I don't figure to get tossed out in any alley this time. But it ain't stoppin' with that, happen so. There's things cowboys'll stand for—a little slickerin' in a card game, or maybe a percentage girl clippin' a drunk—but when you went to stealin' cattle from a stony-broke old man you stepped across the line."

"Getting high and mighty, aren't you?" Selmer asked mildly. "You're putting me to considerable trouble; Jones—now I'll have to take over the whole town. And you've got yourself caught right in the middle. Soapy. . . ."

That last word, spoken as softly as the rest of it, was the signal. Must have been the barkeep's name—the hombre jerked a shotgun up from behind the bar and swung its twin muzzles toward Charlie.

Charlie drew his iron and fired. The barkeep was flung back by the impact of the bullet and he fetched up against a barrel, clutching at his right arm. He never did get to fire that shotgun.

But by that time everything was happening at once. Charlie had a sick conviction that Selmer had been right, that he'd cut himself a bigger piece of pie than he could

handle, and that everybody in the room was shooting at him.

He kept his attention on Selmer, though, and saw the man's fixed smile dissolve into black fury, and saw Selmer's hand dart to the pocket of his vest.

The hombre had a derringer in there. As the weapon came into sight Charlie fired again and saw Selmer jerk and go sliding along the bar, clawing at the mahogany for support and not getting enough of it to keep him on his feet.

There was a whoppin' big jolt then, and the room spun around a couple times. By the time he got it stopped, Charlie realized that he'd been the one doing the spinning—he'd been hit by lead and now he was down on his knees in the sawdust, and the whole saloon was full of gunsmoke and noise.

The noise wasn't gunfire, though. The townsmen had smashed the windows and were coming through them. At the back of the room a couple doors had been thrown open and old Ed and Mr. Pennyweather were there, all honed up for war. Ed was shouting, "Hold steady, you hombres—we got a sawed-off here!"

It was Selmer's boys who were caught in the middle now. Ol' Charlie started laughing at the way they craned their heads to peer over their shoulders and then lifted their hands, and couldn't stop. Maybe the shock of his wounds had done something to him that he never would have expected—anyway he felt all joyous and bubbly and carefree, and blame if he didn't get to wondering what a bullet would do to Selmer's big back-bar mirror.

He triggered a shot, just to see. The mirror seemed to explode into a million fragments that cascaded down in a silvery shower and carried whiskey bottles and stacked glasses along with them to the floor. It was a sight for a man to see. . . .

But then Charlie sort of keeled over.

After a while he came to realize that his head was resting once more on Prudence

Pennyweather's soft lap. He sighed deeply in contentment and looked up at her. "Feller like me," he said, "ought to stay up in the hills where things is quiet."

"You shush," Prudence said. "Everything's all right. You've got just a gash along your ribs, and you shot Selmer in the shoulder, and the judge took a thousand dollars out of the safe and gave it to me to keep for you. Right now they've got those men in a back room and they're talking about how Selmer told them to steal the cattle.

"Your redhead's in one of the rooms, changing her clothes and crying because their steal went haywire. Do you dump all your girls in the water trough? Didn't do you much good with her—it turns out she's married to Selmer."

"Shucks," Charlie Jones said with a grin, "my pore heart's busted. But I'm glad I didn't kill anybody—reckon I never was cut out for such doin's."

Her eyes filled with a strangely tender light. "Then you—you weren't just looking for an excuse to go on a rampage?"

He roused up, regardless of the pain in his side. "Gosh-dang it, gal, I never was! This just had to get done, that's all."

"Oh! Is *that* why they call you—"

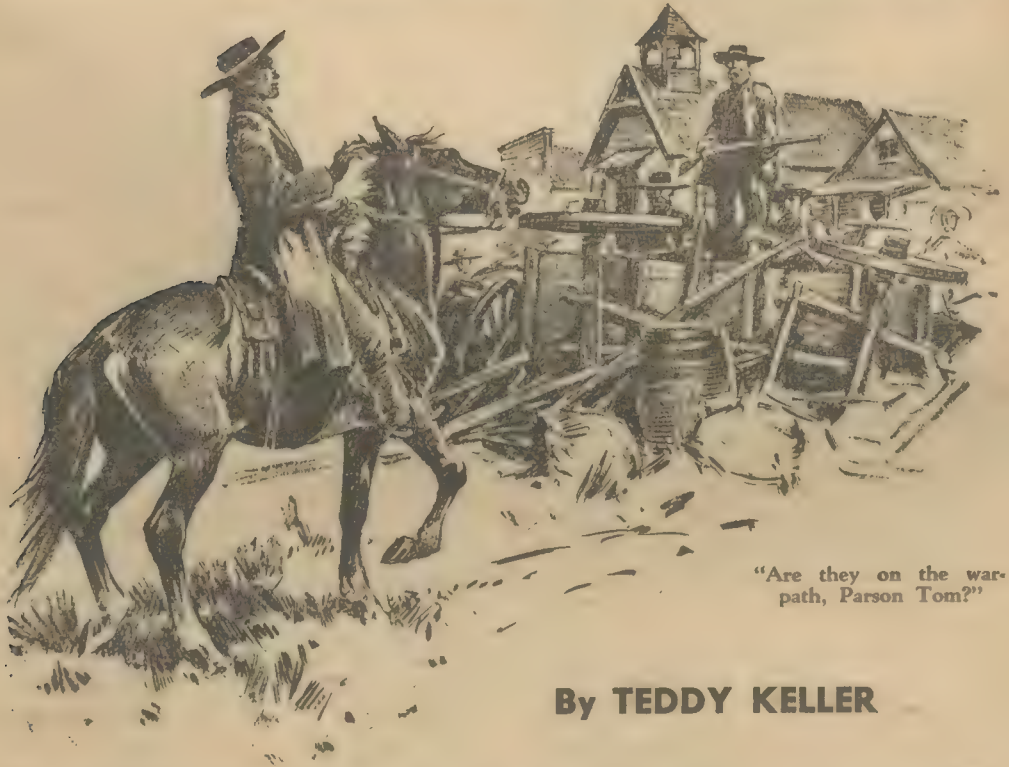
"Yup."

"Charlie." She was smiling now, kind of a shy and wavery smile. "Old Ed was talking to dad, saying that you've got lots of good range. Maybe we could run our cows on it—"

"Might! I got a snug new log house, too—an' no purty wife to tidy it up for me! If you an' me was to decide to go preacher-huntin', right now'd be a good time for it! Gal I— I mean—" He bogged down there, plumb out of brash, and held his breath for more reasons than the wound in his side.

Prudence slipped her arms around his neck and said, "I've been thinking about that too. I always did want to go preacher-hunting, if I ever found the right cowboy, and I think this is a darn good time for it!"

The Parson Meets the Devil



"Are they on the warpath, Parson Tom?"

By TEDDY KELLER

Cottonwood, the raiders figured, was easy pickin's. . . . For only a handful of women and kids guarded the town, herded by a "turn-the-other-cheek" sky-pilot!

TOM HAWLEY made the sign to Red Plume, turned and walked unhurried from the council fire. Hostile Pawnees and Cheyennes moved aside respectfully to grant him passage. When he reached his horse, he took his gunbelt from the pommel. He mounted, waved to the squatting chiefs, and rode out. The folks in Cottonwood wouldn't be too pleased with the temporary truce, he knew. But it was better than open warfare.

He rode to town and waited for the men to make an opening in the barricade. At each end of town the main street was guarded by barriers of overturned wagons, crates and whatever the men could throw into the breach. They lowered their guns and babbled questions at him. He waited, smiling, till the chatter subsided.

Finally a rawboned, weathered rancher spoke out: "Are they on the warpath, Parson Tom?"

"They fixin' for a massacre?" a sunburned farmer asked as Tom dismounted.

Tom raised his hands, palms out, and turned slowly, quieting the crowd. He saw Maybelle in a cluster of women over in front of the Wells, Fargo office. Jeffrey Cullison stood in the front row of men.

"They're on the warpath," Tom said. "There are warriors and chiefs from more plains tribes than you ever heard of. They've chosen Red Plume as their leader."

Men swung to their neighbors and an excited buzz rose over them. A wiry little old man, wearing the scout's buckskins, spat tobacco juice from his perch atop the barricade. He said, "That Red Plume's the smartest redskin cuss 'tween here an' the Apaches—or the Sioux. Reckon we oughta git the women an' kids somewhere safe. We ain't got a chance."

"We have one chance," Tom said. "We can help the Indians."

"Help them filthy redskins?" a puncher exploded. Angry faces confronted Tom and the muddle of voices now rose to a higher pitch.

It took him a long minute to get silence. Then he said, "You've all heard the talk about raids on farms and ranches in this part of the territory." There was a general nodding of wide-brimmed hats. "The Indians are having the same trouble—crops burned, cattle killed or stolen. The thing that touched off this war party was a raid on a Kiowa village. White men slaughtered the braves, ran off their stock and stole their grain. The whites broke the peace—not the Indians.

"There is an evil and cunning man behind all this," Tom continued. "He seeks power and wealth. He knows of our drouth and of the grasshoppers. He knows both we and our red brothers have barely enough food for man and beast for the coming winter. And so he strikes—killing and stealing. When we are sufficiently weak, he will take our lands in exchange for food. Then the land will be his. The Indians and the

whites who remain will be his servants. Those who leave will have to start over. It's not only the Indians we'll be helping, but ourselves."

"You said we got one chance," a rancher shouted from the midst of the group. "What is it?"

"Red Plume is giving us a week to return the cattle and food," Tom explained. "He'll hold off his war party that long if we bring him the man responsible."

The men considered the matter silently, but Jeffrey Cullison laughed harshly. He was a tall, solid man, a favorite with the ladies, a tough man to beat at poker in his saloon. He said, "Our Indian-loving parson has bargained with Red Plume. If we're all scalped, you have the Reverend Hawley to thank."

The circle of men drew around Cullison. A puncher said, "How you figure that?"

"Not long ago," Cullison said, patting his Colt significantly, "Tom Hawley was the fastest gunslinger in the Kansas Territory. I hear he hasn't slowed a bit. He went out there to the meeting with his guns hanging on his saddle. The ladies thought he was brave. I claim if he was brave he'd have shot up that council. Without leaders, those redskins would be lost. Hawley could have saved Cottonwood Vale and towns all over the territory. But he didn't." His voice rose in accusation. "He didn't because he's yellow."

THE circle that tightened around Tom was belligerent. He caught Cullison's gaze and held it. But the gambler couldn't hold it. He had to avert his eyes. He laughed, turned and shoved through the crowd.

"Red Plume is an honorable man," Tom said quietly. "I went to his council fire under a white flag. I would not further lower the white man by violating a truce."

The men calmed somewhat, and Tom went on, "The Indians have every right to retaliate. If they do, there will be slaughter

from the Kansas border to the Rockies. We cannot spare the time or energy for inner strife. We must band together and seek out the men at the root of the trouble."

"Them masked raiders?" a farmer asked.

"Probably," Tom said. "It will weaken our fighting strength here, but there's no other way. Some of you men must go to these places where grain and cattle have been stolen and find a trail. If you fail. . . ."

He didn't finish. He didn't need to. A rancher summoned his hands, gave crisp instructions, and they rode out. Several farmers gathered around the wiry old scout. Tom went to the tie rail and led his horse up the street.

"Tom."

He halted and turned. It was Maybelle Tate, calling from the cluster of women. She stepped from the boardwalk and, holding her skirts above the dust, hurried to him. The combs that caught her brown hair at the temples sparkled in the spring sun. Her soft lips were pressed to a thin line. Doubt clouded the gray eyes and worry pulled her clean features out of their normally happy lines.

She stopped beside him, started to speak, then hesitated.

"That . . . that wasn't very kind of Jeffrey, was it?" She paused, looking at him. "How can you let yourself be called a coward?" she asked irritably.

"Jeffrey is too hasty to judge," Tom said calmly.

"But you didn't even defend yourself," she protested. "All you said was that Red Plume is honorable."

"There was no call to lash back," he said. "A soft answer turneth away wrath."

The gray eyes flashed. "Can't you fight back just once instead of always turning the other cheek? Folks are beginning to wonder if you have a backbone."

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I . . . I don't know, Tom."

"And you won't marry me till you're certain I'm not a coward."

She shook her head and his tone took on a bitter edge.

"Maybe you'd better pick Cullison after all," he said. "He tries to make it clear that he has backbone."

Her eyes widened in surprise. He turned, ashamed, and led his horse up the street. That was an unchristian thing to say, he knew, but he was growing weary of Cullison's needling. Nearly every day for the two years since Tom had built the church in his boyhood home, Cullison had found opportunity to refer to Tom's wild days.

Ten years before, in his late teens, Two-Gun Tom Hawley was known to every lawman in the territory. He was no killer, no bank-robbing desperado, but he was a wild kid with a knack for getting into shooting scrapes. He was in the thick of cattle and Indian wars and rangeland feuds. Then came the one-too-many in a long string of saloon brawls. A bullet in the back floored him; vengeful slugs knocked down his guns, riddled him; vindictive gunslicks watched life ebb through his wounds and withheld assistance. When a sawbones was finally permitted to see him, the pronouncement was, "Too late. Nothing I can do for him but to make him comfortable."

His sorrowing mother had him taken home. Whenever consciousness flitted to him, he saw her by his bed, nursing him, praying. After a week of pain and delirium he knew that he wasn't going to die. Later the sheriff told him that when the word got out, the town was cleared of gunfighters overnight.

When Tom was able to sit up, his mother came to him one day, regarded him soberly and sat near him. Before she could speak he told her of the new faith he'd found through her prayers and his recovery. As soon as he was able to travel he went East for study.

It wasn't long before Tom Hawley was riding the territory with a Bible as well as his guns. He preached wherever he could—hotels, cafés, saloons, and occasional

schoolhouse. Often his Sunday morning crowd in a gambling house was greater than the place had enjoyed the preceding night. But he worked for his congregations.

At first, he knew, folks came out of respect for his guns. They were surprised when he preached peace and love. But they came again and brought their friends. Tom proved that, though he retained his old speed, he would never use his guns again. He still wore them—partly from habit, partly to show that he could wear them and still settle an argument without touching them.

Finally he returned to the valley of the cottonwoods and built his church. In good weather old friends came all the way from Abilene and Dodge to hear him. The church prospered and he was happy and he fell in love with Maybelle. But when the punchers gathered in Cullison's saloon, the talk was that Tom's preaching was an escape, that his near-fatal wound had cowed him. Why else, they asked; would a gunslinger deplore violence and avoid trouble even when it meant sacrificing pride?

TOM paused, now, at the upper end of Main Street, where men were dismantling the barricade. There was suspicion and doubt in their faces. Indian-lover and coward, they were thinking. But they'd still follow him.

"As soon as you can," he said, "ride out to the nearby ranches and farms. We'll need help if we track those raiders. I'd like to have every able-bodied man at the church in the morning. And tell the farmers to bring their grain. It'll be safer in the church than at a score of unprotected farms. The ranchers can leave enough men to guard their cattle."

The men finished their task and hurried to their mounts. Tom strolled up the hill to his church. Was there a chance, he wondered, to track down the elusive raiders? His plans were beginning to fall apart.

Maybelle, he was certain, had been on the point of accepting. And the bishop finally had been convinced of the wisdom of sending missionaries to the plains Indians. But Cullison's accusations had roused Maybelle's doubts. And when the bishop heard of the war party, he'd not risk his workers. Perhaps in the war party and the belligerent Cullison, Tom was reaping the seeds of violence sown years ago.

The next day, Saturday, was a balmy spring day. Cottonwoods hoarded great patches of cool night at their feet and meadowlarks trilled their songs across the endless rolling prairie. It should have been a great day. But Tom was depressed as he went to meet the people. Somehow he felt guilty, he felt it was his responsibility that Cottonwood Vale was caught between Indians and raiders with Cullison stirring the men unwisely. And Cullison's words were having an effect. Tom met few friendly faces when he stood before the gathering.

He explained the Indian problem. Then he said, "We need every man and older boy to try to track those raiders. We must learn where they've hidden the food and we must bring it back. We'll use force if they won't surrender."

"Surrender!" Cullison snorted, jumping up from his front row seat. "Surrender? What kind of talk is that?"

Tom glanced to a west window where men were scooping corn into the hastily rigged bins inside the church. He looked out to the families gathered from all parts of the community. Too many of those men wanted to be party to a mass blood letting. "The band of raiders we want," he said, "numbers no more than fifteen, according to reports. We have three times that here. There's no reason for killing when we might accomplish our mission peaceably. And remember—we must reach the grain before it can be destroyed. Otherwise, we fail."

"Those men respect no law but the six-

gun," Cullison said, moving toward the pulpit. Behind him, there was a murmur of approval. He spun and faced the crowd. "I say let's find 'em and kill 'em. If we make a surprise attack, they'll have no time to burn the grain. Personally, I don't give a—" He caught himself, glanced around the church, and smiled. Most of the people smiled back. "Personally, I don't care about the Indians' wormy corn."

"I do," Tom said evenly. "Let me remind you that the lives of hundreds of people depend on our seeking justice for the Indians."

"Indian lover," Cullison spat, glancing back. "Maybe we'll just get ourselves a white rag and gut-shoot up Red Plume, like our parson was afraid to do."

The murmur of approval grew to a menacing roar. Tom looked down into faces distorted by a lust for what they considered righteous murder. Already men were checking .45's and rifles, older boys were thrilling to the adventure that lay ahead, women were cautioning their men.

Tom raised his voice above the clamor and shouted, "People of the community, I beseech you—"

The crackle of gunfire interrupted him. Women searched frantically for wandering children and the men stampeded to the windows. From the raised pulpit Tom had a clear view down Main Street. Men were riding up and down the street firing into store fronts and houses. A figure appeared in the doorway of Cullison's saloon, staggered across the boardwalk and toppled into the dust. Most of the townspeople were in church. There were few to oppose the howling raiders.

"It's them!" a farmer shouted from a window. "They're all wearin' black masks. It's the raiders."

Abruptly the shooting stopped and the riders headed east out of town. A small out-building at the other end of town was afire and the store fronts were shattered. Two bodies lay in the street.

"Get to your horses," Cullison shouted, turning away from the window. "Now we won't have to follow a trail. We'll follow them. Let's go."

"Wait!" Tom called. "This may be a trap."

Men milled uncertainly, glancing from Tom to Cullison. They were crazy to hit the saddle, Tom knew, and throw hot lead after the raiders. But they still held a healthy respect for the Hawleys—both Parson Tom and Two-Gun Tom.

"What're you afraid of, yellow-belly?" Cullison shouted. "We've got a chance to jump down their necks and you want us to wait." He waved to the door. "Saddle up, men. Let's ride."

The mass of men bulged toward the door, but nobody went out. They were waiting for another exchange between their leaders to decide their course.

"It's too well planned," Tom said. "Why didn't they loot those stores? Why didn't they rob homes? Why didn't they come after the grain? Because they want to lead you out of town and into a trap. Don't go."

"You coward," Cullison yelled. "Don't worry—they won't come back to bother you. We'll ride 'em down." He leaped to a chair and shouted fervently, "Men—the longer we talk, the farther away they get. Let's stop wasting time. Let's go get 'em. Now!"

A chorus of shouts approved Cullison. The crowd surged to the door, burst through, and men poured from the building. Cullison went out of a window, to be at the head of the posse. He led the first of the men away, streaking through town, while the last ones still scrambled from the church.

The women watched their men out of sight, then drew up in nervous little clusters. They knew that some men would not return, and each prayed that her man would be among the live heroes.

Ignored, Tom watched, knowing their thoughts. He offered his own prayers, but

they were concerned with the safety of the churchful of women and children.

BY NOON it was clear there would be no quick battle, that the men would have a long ride before overtaking the raiders. The women relaxed and became hungry. They moved around, undecided, not knowing what to do, but refusing to go to Tom.

Finally he stood and spoke quietly. "I must caution you that all of us here are in a desperate situation. Your men have ridden foolishly behind a hot-headed man. The good Lord, this house of worship and my guns are our protection. If the raiders come back, there will be no hiding places in town and few on the prairie. Our only hope is to remain here."

He moved to the door and the women cleared from his path. Their faces showed fear, anger and hostility. They didn't like him saying that their men had been foolish. But neither did they like to think about the raiders returning to the unarmed church.

"I'll ask Maybelle to go to town with me to fetch food and bedding," Tom said. "When we're gone, lock this door and don't open it for anybody you don't recognize."

He walked to the hitch-rail, selected a horse and buckboard. Maybelle joined him as he readied the rig. There was a sulky obstinacy in her eyes, but he couldn't tell how she felt. He handed her up to the seat, climbed in beside her, and they drove silently to town.

Tom was torn by her silence. Probably more than any man in the church he had wanted again to feel a galloping horse under him, to feel the solid .45s in his hands as they blaisted raiders from their saddles. He had lived too long by the gun to forget the thrill of a chase and the excitement of a good fight. But he had tried to do what he thought was right. Now he wondered if Cullison had been right. If he had, Tom's guns were needed with the men. Right or

wrong, he'd have been redeemed with Maybelle. But now it was too late—in every respect.

"What about those men?" Maybelle asked.

Tom roused himself and looked where she pointed. The two bodies couldn't be left in the street. He halted the buckboard and climbed down, hating the task.

"I'll carry them to doc's," he said. "If he's not back tomorrow, I guess we'll have to bury them."

One of the men was the owner of the general store, the other was a lean bartender from Cullison's saloon. Tom lugged them both to the room behind the doctor's office, glad there hadn't been more people in town. But there was a new widow at the church.

Back outside he guided the horse to the store, then helped Maybelle down. "Better get food for two days," he said. "You pick it out. While you do that, I'll round up what bedding I can find."

She nodded and went into the store. Tom hurried to the small hotel. He took all the keys from the desk and went upstairs. As he stripped the beds he peered often from the windows, ready to run to Maybelle's side. He thought the raiders wouldn't be back before nightfall, but there was no way to be sure.

He got the pile of bedding downstairs and into the buckboard, then helped Maybelle load the food. When they were done he helped her up. He climbed beside her without a word. They cleared town before she spoke.

"You wish now you'd ridden with the men, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you're afraid, aren't you?"

He thought about that, then admitted, "I am."

"Jeffrey was right," she said hotly. "You are a coward. Of course you didn't want the men to leave. But you weren't afraid for them. You were afraid to be left

behind with the women and children. Am I right?"

He flapped the reins along the back of the slowly moving horse. The old fighting instinct boiled up inside him and he no longer cared. "You've been talking with Cullison too much," he said. "You're beginning to sound like him." He turned on her, surprised at his own fury. "If I say no, you'll call me a liar. If I admit I'm afraid, you'll say Jeffrey was right. I'm tired of being ridden. My patience is running out."

He watched astonishment register in her eyes and regretted his outburst. As he faced forward again, he heard her shocked gasp.

"You coward," she said. "You'd never dare talk like that to Jeffrey. Or to me if he was around. Don't think I won't tell him what you said. You'll be lucky if the people do no more than tar and feather you."

Tom made no reply. He drove the buckboard back up the rise to the church, and the women came out to help unload. His next task was unpleasant. He took the storekeeper's wife aside and gently broke the news of her widowhood.

WITH lunch over, the afternoon dragged. Maybelle's hostility spread through the women, and Tom received more and more cold stares. As tension lapsed, the children forgot their fears and became restless. By mid-afternoon their impatient commotion was wrecking Tom's nerves.

The sun dropped toward the prairie, and the note of tension eased back into the church. More and more women slipped to the windows, watching, hoping. The anxiety caught the children abruptly, chilling their boisterous laughter. Tom had to remind the women to prepare the evening meal. He had to order the storekeeper's widow from the tiny study and she, like the others, only picked at the food. Tom ate

what he could, then retired to his study to spend a long time in prayer.

He had expected a difficult night. When he came from the study he knew it would be even worse than he had anticipated. Tension was mounting by the minute. Women peered into the dimming light, twisting kerchiefs and bonnet strings to threads. Several children were already whimpering. When sunset colors faded and darkness cloaked the silent land, the strain became almost unbearable. A complaining child was slapped by a panicky mother. The child feared the silence too much to break it with his cries.

The menacing hush came into the building to stretch taut nerves to the breaking point. A board creaked and a child screamed in horror. A pack of coyotes, drawn by the dead men in town, prowled close. The storekeeper's widow collapsed, sobbing hysterically, then tried to jump through a window to drive the animals away. Tom watched helplessly as he paced the narrow carpet on the pulpit. Finally he began to pray fervently for relief for the suffering women. His prayer was answered.

The first sound was like a cool hand to a fevered brow. In the darkness Tom could barely distinguish Maybelle sitting at the little pump organ. Softly at first, then with growing confidence, the music swelled through the room. Tom began to hum and soon other voices were singing a hymn.

There was no exuberance in the music, but there was comfort. Fears and worries were borne up and wafted into the night which had lost its menace. One by one the women drifted from the windows, gathered their children and slept. At last Tom's voice was a solo and Maybelle's music was a soothing lullaby. He moved near the organ as she finished a song.

"That was a wonderful thing you did," he said softly. "You were the answer to a prayer."

She stood. "I'm glad I was able to help them, poor souls."

She turned and stepped carefully past sleeping forms to her blanket in a corner.

With quiet and peace restored, the night passed easily. Red-eyed after hours of guarding, Tom went out to the pump. It was a beautiful Sabbath. The morning sun caught the dew and a million gems sparkled in the buffalo grass.

Tom washed and returned to the church as the sleepers roused. He stood on the steps while the women and children filed to the pump. The women forced a courageous gayety as they prepared breakfast, but there remained the animosity to their parson.

His attempts at conversation were stonily ignored.

With breakfast over and the church tidied, the women moved back to their windows. Once again Tom felt the tension begin to mount. He stepped to the pulpit, signaled Maybellé, and announced a hymn. Reluctantly at first, then prodded by habit, the women shuffled to their pews.

Tom offered a prayer, read a verse from the Scripture, and selected another hymn. When the hymn ended he launched into his sermon.

For a minute he fumbled, hardly knowing what to say. There was anger in his heart—anger at Cullison, anger at the blood-thirsty men, the short-sighted women. But the women were worried, the children frightened. When Tom spoke, he gave them words of comfort and peace. Tranquillity eased the weary faces, relaxed the taut bodies.

Tom made it brief and effective. But when he announced the final hymn, the hostility crept back. The men were still gone

and the parson was still spineless. The singing was almost as loud as before, but there was no spirit to it. Tom wished he'd selected a shorter number. Then, midway through the fourth verse, the door burst open.

The singing choked and died as the women turned. Two masked men stood in the door. The raiders. It was no comfort to Tom to know he'd been right.

He caught a movement from the corner of his eye and looked through the windows. Masked men were moving wagons against the building. The two men stepped confidently inside. One of them was a tall, solid gent, but he was dwarfed beside the other. The apparent leader was a giant of a man. A gunbelt hung like a watch fob on his big frame and a black kerchief barely covered his massive face.

"Easy pickin's," he said. The other nodded and the leader took a step forward. "Ever'body start puttin' grain through them windows."

Tom leaned on the pulpit, trying to relax. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked.

"Just set down easy, parson," the leader said. "Don't wanta kilf myself a church man less'n I gotta." He made a sweeping gesture. "And you ladies. Make the kids behave. Ain't aimin' to hurt nobody 'less they cause trouble."

Tom peered down at the giant. "Are you the men who're responsible for the Indian uprising?"

"Reckon we may've killed some Kiowas," the leader said.

"And," Tom said, "you're also the ones who've been stealing from farms and ranches."

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 206), showing the Ownership, Management and Circulation of Big Book Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1952. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing office, and business manager as follows: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total number of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also, the statements in the five paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1952. Eugene Jelinek, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in Bronx County. No. 63-1062300. (Certificate filed in Bronx and N. Y. counties. My Commission expires March 30, 1953.) (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

The big man shrugged and nudged his assistant.

"What are you doing with the food you take?" Tom asked.

"Well," the leader began, "we. . ."

He broke off as his assistant seized his arm.

The shorter man shook his head violently. He said nothing, but his eyes were bright.

His silence interested Tom.

"Ain't gonna hurt to tell," the leader said. "This's our last raid 'round here. Folks can kinda get ready for what's to come."

THE shorter man again made a silent protest, but the giant shook him off. "You wanta know what's happenin' to all that grain?" He jerked his huge head toward his companion. "This here's the future boss of the whole territory. He'll tell you 'bout the grain when you get hungry." The hulking frame shook with silent laughter. "And wait'll you hear the price."

"Shut up," the other man growled.

"You . . . you renegade!" It was Maybelle's voice.

"Stop," Tom hissed, but he was too late. She moved away from the organ and stalked up the aisle toward the masked men.

"You big, brave men," she spat, nearing them. "Can't you work for your land? Must you steal what others have. . ."

The man reached out a huge hand, seized her wrist and jerked her to him. His chuckle grated. "Been lookin' for one with spunk. Reckon I'll take her along."

"Let me go!" Maybelle screamed. "When the men get back they. . ."

The man roared with laughter. "We got your men on such a goose chase they ain't gonna be back for a week." Laughing, he clutched the screaming, kicking girl to him.

The shorter man moved forward hesitantly. Suddenly he leaped, got his hand on Maybelle, and pulled her free. "Leave her alone," he snarled, backing away with her

Tom saw Maybelle's head swing to her unexpected protector. Her voice was a choke of astonishment. "Jeffrey!"

The big man poised, threatening, then chuckled. "We'll finish this later. Maybe I'll be boss," he said, glancing around the church. His gaze fell on Tom. "Cullison, just swing that girl around 'tween us and the parson. The preacher-man's wearin' guns."

Maybelle, helpless, glared at Tom. "Don't worry about him," she said. "He's afraid to use his guns except for show."

"Guns are for weaklings," Tom said quietly. "It requires little courage to fire a gun. But it takes real courage to build a home in this land. The land and the homes will remain when the guns are gone. Only righteousness will prevail."

"Stop preachin'!" a woman cried. "Do something!"

"He's afraid," another screamed.

The giant chuckled. "Preacher, if you ain't no better with guns than you are with words, don't try nothin'."

The contempt cut deep, but Tom kept his voice soft. "You men can be forgiven. You can live among us as brothers. But first I'll have to take your guns."

He stepped down from the pulpit and glanced up the aisle. Maybelle was about even with the rear pew. Behind her, crouching slightly, Cullison exposed only his masked face over her shoulder. The giant stood confidently behind Cullison. He had drawn his gun when Tom stepped down. He raised it casually and fired.

Searing pain stabbed at Tom's right shoulder. He staggered back against the pulpit and went down. Screams of the women and children tore at his brain.

The big outlaw sheathed his gun and his voice was a thundering command. "Ain't wastin' no more time. Burn it down!"

"Wait a minute," Cullison said, spinning. "Those weren't my orders."

"Been thinkin'," the big man said calmly, drawing again. "I been doin' all the dirty

work. I aim to have some say an' a bigger cut."

Dissension. Tom looked away from the two men. The grain was still unmoved. As he prayed for wisdom and strength, a burning taper flashed through a window. Outside, men howled. Inside, women cried hysterically, threatening to stampede. More tapers hurtled through the window.

A small boy broke from his mother, seized a taper and flung it out. Without hesitating, he dashed for another. The giant brought his gun up leisurely. He snapped a shot at the boy's feet. The boy fell back, wide-eyed.

Flames licked at the grain. Women and children, confused sheep, cowered against a wall. Shocked and bewildered, Tom lurched up against the pulpit. He stared, realizing for the first time that men like the giant and Cullison would never heed the words of brotherly love. They came to steal and destroy and they wouldn't hesitate to kill. Yet here were the women and children, without a leader, without protection, their precious grain already beginning to burn. And here, too, was Tom's church. He had given it his sweat, his devotion, his life. Now the flames would level it.

He clutched the pulpit, watching the flames, the children, Cullison. How much more could he bear of turning the other cheek? "Love thy neighbor . . . bless them that persecute . . . thou shalt not kill. . . ."

These things were written. But there were others. "Fight the good fight . . . eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . . whoso sheddeth man's blood. . . ." Of course! The good shepherd would protect his flock even if he had to kill the wolves.

A new strength flooded his body. He straightend, ignoring the stabbing pain in his right shoulder. "Cullison," he said.

Cullison and the heavy outlaw faced him. The big man still held his gun, but his arm hung loosely at his side. Cullison's smooth talk had salved the dispute.

Tom's voice came calm. As he spoke he

eased his coat tail back from his left side. "Cullison, call your men to put out the fires."

"Hawley, you're finished," Cullison said. A new determination blazed in his eyes. He shoved Maybelle aside and gripped the butt of his .45. "This land will be mine. There'll be no room for a psalm-singer. Now make your play so I can kill you."

Tom had never been the first to draw, but this time he faced two. And the big man already had his gun out.

"May the Lord be merciful," Tom prayed, "and may He guide my hand."

Cullison was reaching. The raider's hand was coming up. Tom's hand flicked down, closed, yanked. He saw the giant's gun blaze, felt a tug at his sleeve, felt his own gun kick, then swing to Cullison and kick again. The outlaw toppled, groaning with pain. Cullison staggered, his gun barely unsheathed. He triggered two slugs into the floor, then pitched forward and sprawled, dying.

Outside, men shouted and horses moved quickly. Boots pounded the steps. A dozen masked men spilled through the door. Tom covered them with his smoking gun and gave them an instant to see their fallen leaders.

"Hold it," he called. "Little Ben, you, Johnnie, and. . . ."

He beckoned several boys. "Take their guns and guard them well. You men, get the pump going and put out the fires. Now!" He snapped a shot into the door jamb, and the men moved.

Tom sagged back against the pulpit as Maybelle rushed to him. She eased him to the floor and murmured, "Oh, Tom. I'll get a doctor."

"Where?" he asked, smiling. "Better get a preacher."

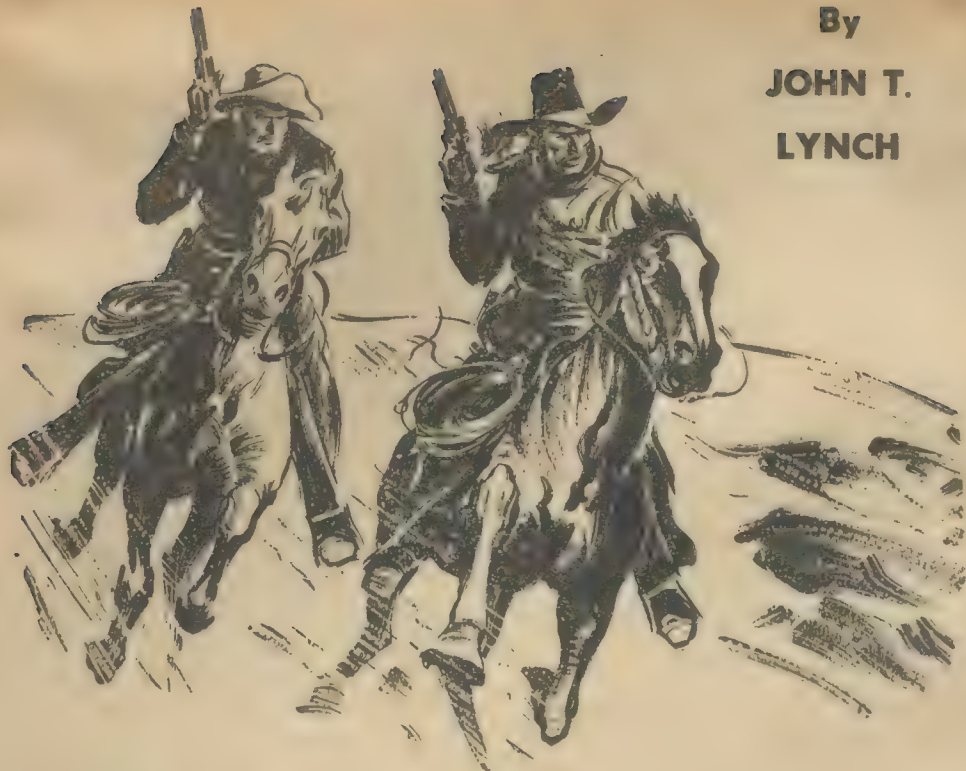
"Oh, Tom," she gasped, "is it that bad?"

His smile broadened. "Not a burying parson—a marrying one."

"Tomorrow," she promised.

★ ★ ★

By
**JOHN T.
LYNCH**



DEATH DRAWS A PAIR OF JACKS

*McDonald and Small had held aces too long in their
renegade career. . . .*

TO NUMBER 320 Sansome Street, San Francisco, came a letter of bitter complaint to John J. Valentine, general superintendent of Wells, Fargo and Company. Dated April 10, 1872, the indignant missive said:

Of all the sneakin, lowdown tricks we ever heard of, you people shore take the caik. This thing of yore offerin \$300 per head for the capture, dead or alive, of anybody holdin up yore coaches is a disgrace. You know full well that highwaymen will be turnin each other in—besides all the greedy lawmen and amatchoor blood-money hunters you inkoorage. To hell with you and yore stages. We quit. We are

headin' for Panamint, where, we onderstand, silver has been struck, and its too far out in the desert for pantywasted lawmen and reward hunters to come to. One other thing—you could have at least gave us a warnin. We would have saved some of our, we mean yore, money, for a rainy day, instead of blowin it as fast as we got it.

The Pair of Jacks.

The Pair of Jacks were well known to Wells, Fargo and Co. More specifically known as the Messrs. Jack McDonald and Jack Small, they had been holding up coaches in the Nevada and California mining districts, successfully, for a long time.

On reading the letter, Superintendent Valentine, Jim Hume, chief of the firm's detectives, and other officials, breathed a collective sigh of relief.

They only hoped that the missive stated the truth.

It did—to a certain extent.

On their arrival in Panamint, after a long and thirsty journey across the desert floor from Bakersfield, Small and McDonald found the town, far up in the Panamint Mountains, exactly to their tastes. The silver rush had just begun, the place was wide open, and there was not a lawman within many miles. Too, the Pair of Jacks were happy to meet many old friends from various owlhoot trails throughout the West. For other criminals had also heard of Panamint as a sanctuary, and almost everybody was striking rich claims.

Within a few weeks, Small and McDonald felt quite at home. With little money in their pockets, and not much else to do, the pair had listlessly ambled into the hills to stake out a few claims. They did just enough digging to learn that they had become the owners of one of the most valuable silver ledges in the entire area. Averse to any form of physical endeavor, they decided not to dig farther, but to hold onto the claim until it could be sold at a great profit.

One sunny afternoon, while most of the citizens were out digging on their respective claims, Small and McDonald were lolling on the porch of a saloon. They watched, with mounting interest, as a man measured off a large area on the vacant lot just across the street. When the man came over to refresh himself, the languid pair asked him what he was doing over there.

"Measuring off what will be the foundation for a stone building," was the man's answer.

The Pair of Jacks guffawed. "No sense in all that work," Small pointed out. "They ain't a place here what has any foundation."

"Oh, but this is different," said the builder. "This one is going to be the first bank in Panamint. Got to make it solid. By th' looks of a lot of th' people here, looks like th' bank will have to be good and solid. It will be made of rock."

"Anything personal in that there remark, friend?" asked Jack McDonald.

"No—not at all," the man hastened to say. "I didn't mean that as an aspersion on you two gentlemen. I'm sure you would have no thoughts of taking what did not rightfully belong to you."

Both Jacks nodded in smiling approval. "You got us right, friend. You just wait an' see."

When the two Jacks were alone, Small said, "I guess we are th' luckiest men on earth. Our future is bright as lightnin'. Here we got a mine, and now will come a bank we can rob as soon as they get it built. An' also, it won't be long before stage coaches will be comin' up through that steep an' narrow gulch where they are makin' th' new roadway. That means there will be people comin' in with wallets in their pockets—and that stagecoaches will be leavin' with chests full of silver ingots. We can get 'em comin' an' goin'."

McDonald laughed gleefully. The future was rosy, for sure. "Just shows what clean an' honest livin' will do for a couple of gents like us."

Until December, 1874, working the Panamint silver claims had been on a small time basis. Rich as the strikes were, the original discoverers, like Small and McDonald, could not produce much without capital. The small amounts that were mined were taken to Bakersfield by the miners themselves, and sold. There was a gentlemen's agreement in force that made it bad manners to hijack fellow miners on the lonely Panamint road.

Even Small and McDonald respected and obeyed this arrangement.

In January, then, came the big break the pioneers had been waiting for. The large

mining capitalists, who had been operating the great Comstock discoveries, finally sent emissaries to examine the Panamint district, of which they had been hearing so much. When the news got back to them that Panamint's silver riches were enormous, the operators, themselves, hurried to the little town. Claims were bought feverishly—and wisely. Senator Bill Stewart, personally, inspected the Small and McDonald claim and offered them \$30,000 for it.

The Pair of Jacks quickly accepted. They figured that this was only an initial payment, although they kept the fact to themselves.

IT WAS not until Stewart and the other big operators began to mine in earnest that they found themselves faced with the big problem of how to get the silver ingots out of Panamint. The few early tries at simply sending treasure loads down the narrow mountain road on flat wagons were abandoned. Each wagon had been waylaid at least four times on the trip, not only by Small and McDonald, but by many others of their identical character. Soon all shipments stopped.

For Small and McDonald, there was no profit in this. They wanted treasure-laden traffic on the road. Together, they went to Senator Bill Stewart with an idea.

"Why don't you go to San Francisco, and persuade Wells, Fargo to run stages in an' out of Panamint? Tell 'em there's a lot of business to be done. They'll listen to a man like you."

Bill Stewart agreed that it was worth a try. He traveled to San Francisco and presented the idea to the Wells, Fargo and Company officials.

The "Treasurer Carrier of the West"—as its motto stated—absolutely refused to deal with Panamint. Wells, Fargo and Company had already heard of Panamint's type of average citizen, as well as its topographic situation.

Even so, Superintendent Valentine and Jim Hume were nearly persuaded to change their minds on the matter by Senator Stewart's famous eloquence. But Stewart, not knowing exactly whereof he spoke, started to name a few of the outstanding citizens of Panamint. He rattled off names of sterling characters until he came to those of Messrs. Small and McDonald. That, as the saying went in those days, did it. Wells, Fargo and Company were now positive that they would have no truck with Panamint.

With the matter settled, as far as the firm was concerned, Jim Hume did offer Bill Stewart a bit of advice. "Bill, you evidently don't know many of the criminals away from the Comstock region. But, you watch out for Small and McDonald. Hell, they'll rob you blind—even if you did buy their claim. Why, I'll bet they are waiting around, even now, to steal the silver you get from that claim. You ship it out, and they will steal it. Mark my words."

On his return to Panamint, Stewart told the other operators the bad news, then visited Small and McDonald. Laughingly, he told them what Hume had said about them and their intentions.

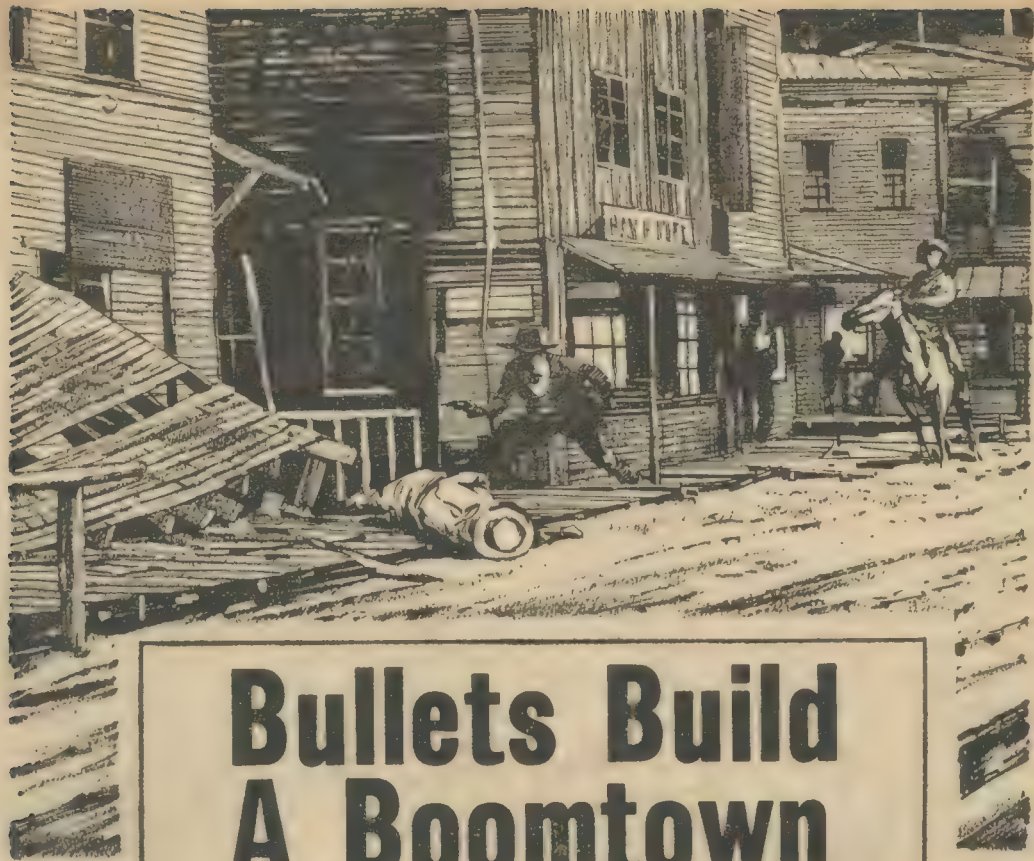
"What's so funny about that?" asked Jack Small. "We do intend to take all of that silver we can get. Might as well let you know. There's nothin' you can do about it, anyhow."

"Yep," cut in Jack McDonald. "Th' laugh is on you, Stewart. We'll get every ounce of silver shipped out of here. Especially that from our claim—th' one we sold to you."

Bill Stewart reluctantly admired the Pair of Jacks for their frank statement of their astounding intentions. "In that case," he said, grinning, "I'll let you boys know whenever I get the first shipment ready to go down the mountain."

Everybody in town knew that something big was going on out at the former Small

(Continued on page 108)



Bullets Build A Boomtown

By WILLIAM COOK

This time, the Marshal was fighting far heavier odds than a lawless, kill-crazy town. . . . A hidden, compelling voice, urging him to call it quits!

THE stage pulled to a slithering halt in front of the hotel, and Dan Alderman climbed down stiffly to stand ankle-deep in the mud by the watering trough. He was a roughly dressed man, heavy through the shoulders, the stamp of solitude and his own peculiar conflicts written in the deep lines of his face. The rain cascaded from the gutted eaves in a shimmering sheet, and the yellow light

streaming from the windows sparkled from the dimpled puddles.

Dan pulled the deerhide coat over the butts of his guns, and shouldered his war-bag. He gave the busy street a quick look, and mounted the gallery of the hotel. He stopped suddenly, a tall angular shape in the half-light, and his dark eyes narrowed as a short, thin man pushed away from the wall, and crossed to stand before him.



Dan shot twice at the man who dodged
between the feed store and the old
hotel. . . .

The man sent his half-smoked cigar spinning into the muddy street, and said wonderingly, "Dan Alderman! Hell, I didn't think you had the gall to come back!"

Dan set the warbag down easily, and let his hands slide into his coat pockets. He ran his eyes over the blond man quickly, and his voice was smooth and relaxed.

"You know, I kept remembering how you pointed a Colt at me five years ago, and told me never to come back. I kept wondering if you could back that brag." Dan let the silence stretch out, listening to a lumbering Western Union wagon boil out of the main yard and careen madly through the congested stret. He heard the wild call of the dealers from the gambling houses, and somewhere down the darkened street, the quick smash of gunfire laced the night with pounding charges of sound. These sounds soothed him, called to him with a nameless excitement that was life itself to him.

Dan watched the wild tension recede from the blond man's pale eyes, and slowly he let out his breath.

Roy Page struck a match and lit a fresh cigar with hands that were not quite steady. His voice was cold and flat. "Don't plan on staying, Dan. We ran you out once at the point of a gun, and we can do it again. . . . Or carry you out if you're stubborn." He moved to step around him, and Dan laid a firm hand on his arm, holding him.

"We? Does that mean that you and old man Moffat still run this town?"

Roy Page laughed brittlely, and jerked his arm free, stepping into the mud of Platte Street. Dan watched him for a long moment, then shouldered his warbag, and kicked the hotel door open with his toe. He paused before the high desk and shook the water from his hat with a sharp slap against his leg.

The clerk raised a bald head from his *Harper's Weekly*, and gave him an interested stare. Dan swiveled the register around, and wrote: *Dan Alderman—Abilene, Kansas*. He laid a ten dollar gold piece on the counter. The clerk peered at the name on the register, and then spun a key on the counter. "Twelve—at the end of the hall, and right."

Dan gave him a brief nod, and tromped up the stairs. The boards squeaked beneath the worn and faded carpet, and the flicker-

ing kerosene lamps sent long shadows in the dim hallway. From behind a thin door panel, the sound of rattling poker chips and the sharp slap of cards touched him and faded as he moved on.

The lock turned with a snap, and he shoved the door open with his knee. He took three steps before the fresh cigar smoke registered on him, and he flung the warbag from him, pulling both guns as he picked up the dull red eye staring at him from the darkness. Dan's voice was tight as he placed his shoulder blades against the wall and said, "Put a light on yourself, or I'll blow you to kingdom come!"

He eased the hammers down on his Navy Remingtons as a portly man wiped a match alight, and touched it to the lamp wick. A soft yellow glow flickered and flooded the room, and Dan shoved the guns back into his holsters. He crossed to the dresser and poured a glass of water. He studied the older man at length, and said, "A little lonely, sitting in the dark, ain't it, Judge?"

Judge Bockman hefted his bulk from the chair, and crossed to stand beside Dan while he towed himself dry. There was pride in the old man, and he called on it to save him in this moment of confusion. "I can guess how you feel about me, Dan. How you feel about all of us, but I'm glad you came, son. The town needs you bad, although I was the only one who would eat humble pie and ask for you. Omaha is coming apart at the seams. Roy Page's toughs run the place, and the merchants don't care as long as they can make money."

Dan flipped his eyes to the judge's wrinkled face, and a faint trace of anger crept into his voice. "Why should you care what happens to Omaha? I never knew you was so full of civic pride. All I remember was you standing on the corner of Freemont Street, smoking a stogie, while Roy Page ran me out of town at the point of a gun. I wanted to break up his crowd five years ago, and damned near got shot for my efforts."

The judge dipped into his snuff box, carefully framing the words in his mind. "You went at it wrong, son. You didn't ask people for their help, you demanded it, so they wouldn't give it to you." He pulled a ragged breath. "Let's not drag it out now, Dan. It's over, and done with. There isn't any point in us getting in a squabble over it now. The issue is now, an immediate problem, and I'm afraid you needn't expect any help. There won't be anything in it for you but the chance to strike back at Page—and maybe a bullet, if you should fall asleep."

Dan spun to face him, and said bitterly, "But why ask for me? Am I the only U. S. marshal in the territory? Why single me out when you could have got better men just as easy?"

Judge Bockman shook his head slowly, saying, "You're wrong there, Dan. I couldn't have asked for a better man. You have a grudge—a hate that's been eating you for five years, and it will take a bitter man to clean up this town. I wanted a man who expected no thanks—but the satisfaction of getting the job done. You're not fooling me, Dan. You hate the businessmen in this town. You don't have a single friend here, so you won't hesitate when you start trampling on toes."

DAN stripped off his wet pants, toweling himself dry before slipping into a pair of Frisco jeans. He considered the judge's words, knowing they were true. He did hate them, and he knew that he was friendless in Omaha. There might be people here who wanted to be friendly, but the fear of Roy Page's toughs held them back. Dan raised his eyes to the judge, and asked bluntly, "If you're so crazy for a clean town, why didn't you get the merchants together and run them out? Other towns have formed vigilantes—Omaha could do the same."

The judge shook his head again. "We don't have the cooperation of the merchants.

They were ready to move last year, but Western Union came here to string their lines. They poured money into the town. Page got beef contracts with them, and added to the pot. Now the store owners are afraid of losing money if they clean up. I know that the farmers will move in as soon as the toughs move out. There's even talk of a railroad, but not as long as this is the center for outlawry." The judge lit a cigar, and added, "Dan, these are serious times. The South is growing stronger every day, and the border wars are setting the whole country aflame. Last year I looked to the year eighteen sixty with a little optimism and hope, but now, I don't know. Next year is election year, and I hear that a Yankee lawyer from Illinois, named Lincoln, is going to run." He paused to sneeze, and blow his nose. "Half of the people in Omaha are northern abolitionists, and the other half are secretly plotting against them for all they're worth. If there is going to be a war with the South, then Western Union must have their lines laid. Omaha will be the center of their communication system, and we have to have a clean town—a free town, if we're going to meet our destiny."

Dan buckled on his gunbelt, and picked up the pearl-handled Remingtons from the bed, sliding them carefully into the leather. He crossed to light a cigar over the chimney of the lamp, and said, "I see that you still make a damn fine speech, Judge. You almost have me convinced." His dark face pulled into deep lines with his thoughts. "And you expect me to scatter them like a covey of quail?"

Judge Bockman studied the tall man severely for a long moment. "I know you, Dan. I know that you'll break every law and rule in the book to nab your man. I'm not going to say that I approve of those tactics, but I'm a desperate man and I'll agree to most anything to get the job done. You play rough, Dan, and you can't blame people for being afraid of you."

Dan felt the blood run into his face, and said, "That's putting it plain enough. Now, I'll put it to you the same way. I never thought much of you because you sat with folded hands and let old man Moffat dictate to the town. Judge, every man is afraid to die. I'll prove it to you by going to him and telling him that I'll kill him if he doesn't drag his picket."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Dan. The old man is dead."

Dan felt a surge of elation run through him, and he laughed.

"Hell, then the job is simple. Roy Page is a lightweight."

Judge Bockman's face grew heavy. "No, Dan, it makes it harder. Page and Janice Moffat, the old man's girl, have thrown into a partnership. She runs Page's saloon, the Cattle King—while he runs the toughs." The judge beat his fist on the dresser to give his words power. "That saloon is the center of all their activity. They protect every fugitive from justice in the Territory. They even have the gall to celebrate when a badman rides into town."

Dan's mouth pulled into a tight line, and he spun around, striking the wall with his fist. "Damn, that's the dirtiest trick I ever seen played on a man!"

The judge watched him, unsure of what he should say, but his voice was kind, with a tinge of regret. "I didn't know, Dan. I thought you would have gotten over the girl by this time."

Dan Alderman gave a short, dry laugh, and said, "You must be getting senile, Judge. How could a man ever get over Janice? Hell, we were going to get married, but..." He stood with his head down, deep in thought. The past came back to him, brushing against him gently, then more strongly, until he felt the need for action. He roused himself, and slipped into his coat. He crossed to the door, and paused with his hand on the knob, saying, "I think I'll go pay my respects to the female boss of Omaha."

There was a veiled eagerness in his voice, and the thoughts swirling around in his head made lights dance in his eyes.

The judge stood up quickly, and put out a hand as if to stop him. "Now don't do anything foolish, Dan. You're going off half-cocked and it will get you into trouble."

Dan swung the door ajar, and said shortly, "You never saw the time I didn't do something foolish," and closed it sharply behind him.

Dan teetered on the hotel gallery, settling the thing in his mind before stepping out into the sheeting rain. He cursed himself for a fool for even wanting to see her again, but he remembered, and the memory forced him on. The Cattle King Saloon stood on the corner of Freemont Street, a high, false-fronted building, ablaze with lights, and raucous with sound.

He cut into the muddy street, dodging a skidding wagon, and scraped the mud from his boots on the opposite boardwalk. He paused before the entrance, listening to the gambler's call, and the pulsing beat of a string band, fighting to be heard over the thrashing thump of the dancers. Dan gave the lounging bouncer a hostile stare, and shoved the batwings aside with the heels of his hands.

Someone jostled him heavily, and he moved away from the door to lean back against the wall. The sudden glare of the lights from the chandeliers blinded him for a moment, and then he pushed away from the wall, and turned to the bar running the length of the room. He leaned on it, wedged between two telegraph workers, and wiggled his finger at Billy McCune, bartender of the Cattle King.

He paused, idly mopping the bar, and Dan said, "A whiskey, Billy, and out of the good bottle."

Dan raised the drink in a salute, and paused, flipping his head over his shoulder as Roy Page said smoothly, "This one is on the house, Billy," and smiled thinly.

DAN ALDERMAN placed the drink carefully back on the bar, and hooked his long arms on the edge. "This generosity is kinda sudden, ain't it, Roy?"

Roy Page held his smile. "Let's not call it generosity, although I can afford to be generous with a man taking his last drink in the Cattle King."

"And just what makes you think this will be my last drink in this dump?" The question had been mildly put, but Dan was aware of the mounting silence around them. These men knew trouble, lived with it as a constant companion, and Dan felt his nerve ends spark with anticipation.

Roy Page let the smile fade from his face, and his voice was hard and flat. "I hope you didn't come here to make trouble, Dan. Or maybe you came to see her. Well, she don't want to see you, so drink your drink and get out!"

Dan smiled, then laughed as he swung low, striking the man solidly in the pit of the stomach. Roy doubled over, gagging for the wind that wasn't there, and Dan sledged him behind the ear with a knotted fist. The force of the blow drove Roy headfirst into the bar, and his head rapped the edge of a brass spittoon as he rolled in the sawdust. Someone called Dan's name, and he raised his head, searching the crowd for the voice calling, "It's Dan Alderman! Dan Alderman's back!"

He thrust his hands straight out, forcing his way toward the stairs. The crowd parted before his plunging strides, and he stopped short, one foot on the bottom step, looking at the young woman at the head of the stairs.

Time hadn't changed her, Dan saw, and he swept off his hat in an unconscious gesture of gallantry. They watched each other, and her eyes held his until he broke the spell by pointing to the sprawled figure of Roy Page.

Then Dan said, "You ought to send a little bigger one next time, Jan. The little ones were always a cinch for me."

Her smooth cheeks colored, and her soft voice rang like a clear chime in the stillness of the room. "Roy-likes to take things on himself. He'll have to take his own chances."

Dan smiled. She nodded her head, and he climbed the stairs.

She held the door open for him, and he felt a familiar thrill as he brushed past her. She was a small girl, the top of her head barely reaching his chin, but her body was well-molded, and it brought the loneliness of his life against him. Her black hair glistened in the lamplight as she stood there watching him. He flipped his hat in the corner and sank into one of her easy chairs.

Janice Moffat leaned her back against the door, and nodded her head toward the noise below. "Same old Dan—like a bull in a china closet. Walk all over anyone that gets in your way."

Dan searched her voice for a hint of affection, but found nothing there to give him hope. He smiled thinly, and said, "The last time, I was all alone, but now I have an uncle in the North that backs what I do." He watched the look of puzzlement on her face, and dipped a hand into his shirt pocket, spinning the gold badge on the table.

"Her eyes brushed it, and her face settled into smooth, unreadable lines. "You've come up in the world, Dan. Now you've come back to clean up Omaha. Well, it won't work. We have a wide-open town, where a man can come and go—but we don't break federal laws."

Dan smiled, knowing it to be an old argument between them, this fine dividing line between right and wrong. He leaned forward in his chair, and said, "Janice, the cattle that your men sell to the Southern armies in New Orleans and Charleston already belong to the South. They are herds stolen from Southern ranchers, driving north. That kind of money is no good—for the town, or yourself. If I killed a man for his gold, and then spent it all, doing good, it wouldn't justify the crime. I would still have committed murder."

CHAPTER TWO

The Fight at the Mercantile

JANICE crossed the room to stand by the window overlooking the street. The sounds of the night came to them, filtering through the steady beat of the rain on the roof.

Dan listened to her voice, trying to divine the force that moved her.

"Listen to them, Dan," she said. The whole town beats with their voices. They're patriots—taking the cattle away from the South, and then shipping it East to sell back to them. Pa always said to let the suckers fight the wars, and stand back and take money away from both sides. That's what I'm doing—making money from both sides. What difference does it make to me who fights who, and what the South means to a Southerner? As long as they have gold, I'll do business with them—the Yankees included."

She swung around to face him, and the excitement gripping her flushed her face prettily, making her dangerous and desirable to him. She was his kind of woman, he knew that for a certainty, and he knew that she had never been farther from him. She had a power over him, a power that stemmed from her driving temper, and the love of life that overflowed from her. "Dan, forget this insane thing!" she cried. "Come in with me, and we'll go the rest of the way together. I mean it, Dan. Oh, you can't fool me. You and I are cut from the same cloth."

He shook his head. "Sorry, Jan, but it wouldn't work. Neither of us could enter into it with a whole heart. I would always remember that I once was honest, and I'd make you miserable. If you agreed to go my way, it would be the same thing. A person can only do well what comes naturally."

He stood up, retrieving his badge from the table, and moved toward the door, know-

ing that a word would bring her into his arms, but the word wasn't in him. He said, "Listen to the sounds in the street. Hear them and feel the wildness. Get good and full of it, because I'm going to beat this town to its knees."

Her voice slashed at him, and he was mildly surprised at the vehemence of her rage.

"I don't believe that, Dan. No single man is strong enough to beat us now. Even if you did get the stupid businessmen riled up, it wouldn't help you. They're after a fast dollar too, but they want everyone to think they made it legal. They couldn't get along without us. We do the stealing, but after the money passes through our hands, the stink is off of it, and they're glad to get it.

"You tried it once before," Dan. You tried to ram your brand of justice down their throats. It didn't work, and they balked, so you got moved out of town. Well, it's my throat you're trying to cram full now, and I won't take it either." She calmed herself, and said in a softer voice, "You won't last, Dan. I'm going to give Roy Page the high sign, and let him run you out just like he did before—only this time there won't be anything holding him back. You have a kink in you, Dan. You take big steps, and have a heavy hand when something gets in your way. Well, I don't come to taw when anybody yells, and I'm just stubborn enough to take the bit between my teeth and try to toss you."

Her words raked across his pride, and ruffled his quick temper. He laughed, and said, "You're riding for a damn big fall. I'm gonna break you and put shoes on you, and when this thing blows over, I'm gonna pack you across my saddle and take you away with me. You can come kicking and screaming, or you can get some sense, and come peaceful. One way or another, I'm gonna save you out of the wreckage."

Janice let the tears flood her eyes. "Get out of here, Dan! Take your gold badge

and get out—and I warn you, if you try to fight us you'll be killed!"

Her tears unnerved him, and he reached for her to touch her gently. She struck at him blindly, and he pinned her arms down until she quieted. "Jan, Jan, remember how it was once with us?" His voice was husky with emotion. "Was it something we could both throw away?"

She turned away from him, and crossed again to the window, to watch the movement in the street. "I was wrong, Dan—we are not alike. You have a wilderness in you—a complete positiveness that you will win. You're dangerous—and I'm afraid of you."

His voice was bitter with the knowledge that nothing he could say would change her mind. "Someday you'll need me, Jan. Just hope that I'll be around." He waited for a moment, hoping his words might affect her, but he saw that she didn't believe him. He picked up his hat, and closed the door softly behind him.

HE STOOD on the boardwalk, watching the rain beat against the side of the building across the street. He watched a fist fight in front of the saddlemaker's, and then turned his head as the late stage rocketed down the street, coach swaying, mud-splattered curtains waving madly. The sounds of the town pushed against him, and the memory of other towns touched him. He wondered if it would always be this way with him—this call to new places that pushed him over one hill after another to see what was beyond. He knew no home; wanted none. He had his youth, and tomorrow was a vague, unknown place.

Janice Moffat listened to the dying sound of Dan Alderman's footsteps on the stairs. She leaned into the velvet drapes, crying softly to herself, feeling a sense of loss that she couldn't name. She straightened her face with an effort, crossed to the door, and opening it, spoke a few words to a man who waited in the darkness of the hall. The man

grunted once, and she watched him disappear down the stairs. The thought of what she had done came to her fully, and she felt a measureless depression engulf her.

Dan stepped from the Plainsmen's Café just as the sun showed its gold over the eastern rim of the distant foothills. He gnawed on a toothpick, swaying as a raw wind charged down the street. Two doors down, a sign creaked, while a wind-tossed garbage can lid careened madly down the alley across the street.

A knot of riders pounded down the muddy street, and came to a slithering halt before the Cattle King. Dan's eyes narrowed as Roy Page stepped onto the boardwalk, holding the door of the saloon open while they filed in. Page raised his eyes before following them, and Dan felt the impact of the stare.

Lounging against a hitch-rail, Dan watched the town rouse itself for another feverish day. The sun glinted on the squares of glass and the town became a multiple-eyed monster slowly coming awake. Dan kept a casual attention on the front door of the Cattle King. He struck a match, laying it against his cigar, as the doors swung aside, and Roy Page stopped on the edge of the walk, the five riders forming a solid row behind him.

They talked in low tones, and then splashed through the mud to stand in a tight group before him. Dan moved his cigar to a jaunty angle in his mouth and asked, "What is this, Roy—flexing the muscles? A little show of strength?"

Roy Page flushed, and fingered the purple welt running along his cheekbone. "I gave you fair warning, Bully, and now I'm going to tear down a little of the town."

"To show me how tough you are?"

"To show you that I'm the Tom Turkey! And you'll stand there and watch me do it!"

Dan flipped the cigar to the street, and hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt. He grinned crookedly, and said, "Sure, I'd be glad to watch."

He watched the surprise wash over Page's face, and saw suspicion crowd it out. Page turned to one of his men and said flatly, "Take a few of 'em apart for the marshal, Abe."

The gaunt, rough-looking Abe squirted a stream of tobacco juice into the mud with a soft sssppt, and turned as Dan drawled, "Go ahead, mind like a good doggie, but I'll be coming after you when you're through."

Abe grinned, a toothless twisting of his hairy face, and said, "Let's see if you will," and led his gang to their horses tied in front of the Cattle King.

Dan watched them mount and wheel their horses, shaking out their ropes as they approached the hardware store. The street was suddenly filled with their yelling, and the creak of harness leather, and a moment later the support posts were pulled out of the walk, letting the overhang collapse with a jarring crash.

The merchant boiled out of the store, grabbing the bridle of a horse, only to be knocked sprawling by a broad swipe of a pistol barrel. He rolled in the mud, dodging the thrashing hoofs as the riders smashed his windows and scattered grain in the mud of the street. Dan watched him struggle to his feet and lurch toward him, and he shifted his gaze to the upper gallery of the Cattle King. He thought Jan looked like a queen standing there. Her head was high, and defiance for everything he stood for was in every line of her body. A rough grip on his sleeve pulled his attention away, and Dan turned to face the outraged merchant.

Blood streamed from his cheek, and his eyes were full of angry tears. "Stop them! Can't you see that they're wrecking my store! Stop them!" He sobbed with desperation, switching his head from the methodical destruction to Dan, and back again. "You're the law, but you stand there and let them commit this vandalism against an innocent man! You're just as bad as they are!"

ABE moved his men on to the Mercantile. The gallery came away from the false front with a ripping sound. The street was rapidly filling with spectators, and the riders yelled and shot into the air as they dragged the wrecked porch the length of Platte Street in triumph. The hardware merchant pulled again at Dan, and Dan yelled above the din, "You're after the wrong man," and turned him around until he faced Page.

"Ask him to pull them off—they're his men. What's a little fun between friends? Don't you do business with them? Aren't your pockets lined with the gold they spend in your store? Cry to him—he's the boss you want for Omaha!"

Dan pushed the little man away from him, and watched as other businessmen raced from their stores, to cross the street with plunging strides. He watched their faces as they ringed him, shouting curses and insults. He slapped one man who tried to strike him, driving him back against the others. Dan felt the hatred push against him, and the mounting danger of the situation excited him. He pushed away from them, driving through the tight circle with his shoulder, dimly hearing the crash as another front cascaded to the street in a shower of splintered wood.

Dan broke free of them, knocking one man asprawl with a rough motion of his hand. He crossed the street in a few driving strides, mounting the steps of the Cattle King as a heavy-set bouncer blocked the door. Dan swung, and as the man doubled over, drove him from the porch with an up-driving knee to his face. He stopped inside the door, searching the set faces lining the bar. Running a quick glance over the filled tables, he crossed to the stairs. He mounted them rapidly, and twisted the doorknob of Janice Moffat's room. The door was stiff and unyielding beneath his hand, and he backed off a pace and hit it with a ramming shoulder. He heard the wood splinter on the other side, and the crash of breaking

glass as the wildly swinging door upset a small table.

He was proud of her as she faced him; cool, beautiful and self-willed. He rocked to a halt in the center of the room, tall and deadly with a fine fit of temper riding him. His words came out chopped, and his voice was deep with the frustration that simmered within him. "You little fool! What are you trying to do—wreck the whole town just to get at me?"

She smiled at him, and it drove his rage deeper. The knowledge that she had the power to bait him, galled him. "What makes you think I could get at you? I'm only a woman, and you're the aloof and imperturbable lawman!"

Dan crossed to her and slapped her to her knees. She knelt before him, blood dripping from her face onto the dark carpet, and he felt ashamed. He lifted her roughly to her feet and pulled her against him. He tilted her face up and saw that she was crying. Angrily, he dropped his hands and wheeled toward the door. He stopped suddenly and spun to face her, his emotions churning in his face. "Get this through your stubborn little head. Up to now, I've played it cozy because you—well, because of you. From now on it's going to be different, and you'll be handled just like the others!"

She touched her bruised cheek gently, and murmured, "You're still in love with me, Dan—or else you couldn't be so angry."

He opened his mouth to speak; to deny or affirm her statement, he didn't know which, but he closed it with an angry snap, and swung from the room. He met the bouncer coming up as he was halfway down the steps, and leaped upon him without warning. The railing split, and a poker table splintered as they crashed through to the floor.

Dan rolled away, kicking one of his fallen guns into a corner, and rose to face the man, the urge to beat someone up boiling out of

him. The bouncer grunted as he surged to his feet, swinging a sawed-off billiard cue in a tight arc. Dan felt the numbing blow, and lifted the man off the floor by ducking low and throwing him over his head backward. The wind left the bouncer with a loud gasp as Dan landed on his chest with both knees and slashed him across the temple with a closed fist.

Dan's blood was high in his face as he rolled to his feet and asked wickedly, "Who sicked him on me?" He watched the silent faces, letting his eyes swing around the room until he found Roy Page leaning against the bar. The little man straightened and dropped his hands. "I believe I did tell him to throw you out. In fact, I offered him twenty dollars if he beat your brains in in the process."

Dan glared at him until he shifted his eyes. He picked up his fallen gun with one swoop, and crossed to within four feet of Page. His voice was low and ragged. "Roy, the next time I come in here, you try to stop me—but be damn sure that you have a gun in your hand. You'll need it!" Having said this, he shouldered his way out of the Cattle King, pausing at the edge of the walk to survey the wreckage-littered street, which was bathed in the sun of the new morning.

CHAPTER THREE

"Don't Make Me Kill You!"

JUDGE BOCKMAN rapped on the railing of the porch with his cane, and the murmuring stopped. They formed a tight group on the hotel gallery, each man eager to place the blame on the tall man with his feet on the railing. Dan Alderman searched their faces and felt that the money-hungry look in their eyes overrode their outraged civic pride. Judge Bockman rapped again and said, "Gentlemen, I know that this has been a bitter pill for you to swallow. I feel that you have a just and

legal complaint against the marshal here."

Abel Blair, the owner of the wrecked mercantile shouted, "You're danged right I got a complaint—and I'm gonna push it to the limit." He shifted his eyes to Dan, and added, "I'm gonna write the governor about this! You won't be wearin' that badge long! The idea—lettin' those men wreck our town."

Jack Nugold broke in, "You struck me—as if I were a common drunk! Not a finger did you lift to save my hardware store. You'll pay for that blow, sir—just you mark my words!"

Another man pushed his way forward, and waved a finger in Dan's face. "I want some protection! I want the perpetrators of this outrage punished—driven out of town—put in prison, something."

Dan shoved himself erect, and struck a match to his cigar. He knew his indolence infuriated them, and he took his time getting his smoke going properly. He flicked an ash and said calmly, "Gentlemen, I quite agree. I should be punished as well as the criminals that committed this outrage." He raised his eyes quickly and added, "But, consider for a moment these men who indulged for a few moments in a little good-natured fun. Aren't they your friends? Don't they bring you their business?"

Judge Bockman smiled thinly as Jack Nugold said disgustedly, "All right, you made us eat crow, but that don't mean we like it. We want to know what you intend to do about this."

Dan laid his cigar on the railing of the porch and said simply, "Arrest the man," and stepped away from them, crossing the street to the Cattle King with long, easy strides.

Abel Blair waited until he disappeared behind the swinging doors, and said grudgingly, "Got to give the man credit—he's got guts."

Judge Bockman snorted and said, "He had guts five years ago too," and walked away from them.

Dan Alderman paused at the end of the bar, placing himself so that he commanded a view of its polished length. Billy McCune laid down his wiping rag, and moved back until he bumped into the solid row of bottles along the wall. Two men near Dan moved away, and he saw Abe, nursing a drink at the far end. Dan let the silence drag out, watching it saw at the man's nerves. He spoke quietly, but the words fell like the beat of a gong in the still room. "Set the drink down, Abe, and walk out the door ahead of me."

Abe looked around him, and said, "I ain't goin' nowhere."

Dan laid his hands flat on the bar, and said, "I won't fool with you, Abe. You're coming with me—one way or another."

The mild shuffling of feet came to Dan, and he took a step. Abe set the drink down and dropped his hands below the level of the bar. "Don't make me kill you, Marshal! You're alone here."

DAN shoved himself away from the bar, and started around the end. He half saw the movement of Abe's hand, and ducked his head down below the level of the bar as the gun went off. A long gouge appeared on the polished surface. He launched himself in a running crouch, covering fifteen feet before Abe realized he had missed. Dan came erect ten feet away from the man, drawing his Navy Remington in one easy motion. Abe shot again, quickly, and Dan's bullet smacked him solidly in the breastbone, driving him to his knees.

Dan leaped to close the distance, swinging his foot in a long arc, kicking Abe's gun from his hand. He tried to turn as a weight fell on his back, driving him forward and to his knees. He lost his gun trying to regain his balance, and he heard the thump of the feet on sawdust as they closed in on him. He ducked, dodging the descending gun barrel, and threw the man over his shoulder as someone kicked him in the thigh.

Pain knifed through him, and his leg gave way. He rolled under a table, breaking the legs and sending a chair kiting across the room. The yelling and calling seemed far away, and he struck out blindly at a kicking foot, striking the man sharply across the shin with the octagon barrel of his other gun. Someone behind him hit him solidly on the side of the head, and his vision blurred as he tried to dodge a kick and get to his feet. Dan made his way halfway to his hands and knees as someone leaped on his back, and his head reeled as a fist from nowhere hit him solidly in the jaw. Dan rolled into a blackjack table, shaking the man loose by rolling on him, and jarring him with his elbows. He gained his feet near the billiard table, and someone sledged him to the knees with a sawed-off billiard cue.

He sprawled face down in the sawdust, his sides and back a throbbing ache, and thought he was dreaming when the blast of a shotgun tore through the room. He heard her voice, only half believing that it was real as she shouted, "Roy! Roy! The rest of you! That's enough!"

Dan Alderman shoved on his hands and let his head hang until the room stopped spinning for him. He grabbed the edge of the pool table and hauled himself to his feet, standing with head down, gagging for wind to ease his burning lungs. The side of his face felt numb, and he touched the growing puffiness of one eye. His ribs pained when he breathed, and a stinging in the middle of his back told him that he had hide missing. He raised his eyes to the head of the stairs, and saw Janice holding the double-barreled shotgun, hip high.

There was anger in her eyes, and fright, he thought, and it puzzled him. She played the bores around the room, and it held them quiet, the heavy breathing making a croupy sawing in the silence. Dan waited, hearing the town clock strike somewhere down the street, the sound filtering through the room softly, a delicate tinkling bell. He moved a

step nearer, and she swung her eyes briefly to him, saying, "Do what you started to do—if you're man enough."

Dan let out a long sigh, saying, "Once you turn on your own crowd, there isn't any going back."

Her voice was tight. "I'm giving you a chance. Are you going to take it?"

He took his eyes from her, searching the crowd, and dived at Roy Page's knees as the man tried to turn away. They hit with a jar that brought bottles down behind the bar, and Dan made his feet in time to block the smaller man's rush. Dan took a looping blow on the shoulder, and another fist stung his mouth as he rapped Page across the eyes with a driving elbow. The man went down in a skidding sprawl, and Dan grabbed him before he got to his feet, and hit him again. It was his kind of fight now, quick and brutal, and he deliberately cut the man, putting him down quickly because he knew he didn't have strength enough for a prolonged fight.

Dan spun Page into the bar, and let him collapse into the sawdust. He plucked his scattered guns from the floor, and roughly forced the man to his feet. Page stood head down, letting the blood drip from his nose into the sawdust. He raised his head with an effort, and looked at the girl at the head of the stairs. "This I won't forget, Janice. I was afraid that you'd remember, and go back to him. I don't like to be made a fool of because of another man."

Her face clouded, but her voice was firm and decided. "You're jumping to conclusions, Roy. I've gone back to no one. I told you to whip him man to man, if you could. It appears that you aren't the bucko lad you thought you were," she said scornfully.

Page held her eyes, and said, "Look for me to come back, Janice. Keep watching for me, because I won't disappoint you."

Janice flushed and said, "Roy, I find out suddenly that I have switched sides." She shifted her eyes to Dan. "Get him out of here before I change my mind."

A hard light came into Page's eyes, and Dan grabbed him roughly and kicked him through the swinging doors. Page struck the boardwalk with a numbing crash, rolling with enough force to splinter the bar of the hitchrack. He came to a cramped rest in the muddy street, and Dan hooked a hand in his collar, pulling him to his feet.

* * *

Judge Bockman chewed on a dead cigar, and watched Dan as he doused his head in the kitchen sink. Livid bruises laced the marshal's back, and one side of his face had turned a dark blue. The judge cleared his throat and said, "How long do you think Page will stay in jail?"

Dan turned his head and looked at the judge for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. The judge said quietly, "Janice Moffat's lawyer came to me while I was eating supper. He had a writ."

Dan laid the razor down, and towed his face tenderly. "So I arrest 'em, and you turn 'em loose when a jackleg lawyer comes around with a paper!"

"It was a legal paper, Dan. I have to uphold the law."

"Sure—it sure looks like it!" He slipped into his shirt, and added, "I don't give a damn about the law. A man breaks the law, and then appeals to the very laws he broke to save his hide. I figure if a man breaks a law, another man is entitled to break a few to catch him. Tell Page that I intend to shoot him on sight, writ or no writ."

"But, Dan, the man is free! He's innocent until proven guilty!"

Dan laughed, and squared his hat on his head. "To you, maybe, but, to me, he's fair game."

The judge sighed heavily, and slapped his hands against his thighs. "All right, Dan, all right. You have to answer for it, I don't." He thought a moment, and asked, "What about the girl?"

"What about her?"

The judge threw his cigar into the coal skuttle and said testily, "Don't be a blind fool, boy. She's as bad as Roy Page ever dreamed of being. Maybe a little worse, because she's a woman, and a man doesn't know how to fight a woman."

Dan crossed the door, and jerked it open. He stopped, and said, "She's guilty now, but if I locked her up, you'd be screaming that she was innocent. Why don't you make up your damned mind?"

The judge stood up quickly. "Wait, Dan! Don't go to her! Think about it!"

Dan said, "I have thought about it. There's one thing I want to get settled, and once it is. . . ."

He let the rest go, and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Luck of the Irish

DARKNESS had settled over the town, and a driving wind blew from the northeast. He crossed Platte Street, heading for the corner of Freemont, and the Cattle King Saloon. He wondered why she had interfered. He knew her well, and she wasn't the kind to want him owing her anything. The thought caused him a momentary regret.

He cut into the space between the wrecked feed store and the old hotel, and traveled the length of the alley before coming out by a pile of empty beer barrels in back of the saloon. Dan listened, watching the movement on the street before ducking around the corner of the building and mounting the side stairs. A board creaked near the top, and he paused before giving the door a steady pressure with his hand.

He let himself into the dimly lit hall, flattening against the wall, straining to catch the sounds in the saloon below. He waited a moment, then moved two doors down to her room. The door was ajar, the light sending a broad streak of yellow on the

faded hall carpet. He listened at the panel, hearing the rustle of her dress as she moved about, and he opened the door quickly, hearing her startled gasp as she whirled to face him.

Dan kicked the door shut, and leaned against it, watching the sudden fright leave her face. She lowered the gun she held, and said, "You frightened me, Dan. I thought it was someone else."

He grinned crookedly, and asked, "Roy Page, maybe? Coming back after your lawyer sprung him?"

Her voice was soft. "So you know. I don't suppose it would do any good to say that I had nothing to do with it."

Dan shook his head. "No, it wouldn't matter one way or another. I'll kill him as soon as I see him on the street."

"Or he'll kill you."

Dan grinned at the concern in her voice. "Tell me, Jan—just what kind of a deal did you make with Page five years ago to keep me alive?"

He watched the surprise wash over her face, and she said flatly, "I gave him full control of Omaha after dad died." Her voice faded to a whisper. "I was afraid for you, Dan. You were so reckless—so foolish, trying to whip them all single-handed."

He let out a long, relieved breath, and crossed the room to put his arms around her. She came into them willingly, and when she raised her face, he kissed her with a longing he had thought long dead. "I don't think you were ever against me really, Jan. We *are* alike. We're wild and free and walk roughshod over everyone. We'll fight with each other, but life will never get boring for either of us. You still love me, don't you, Jan?" She nodded against his chest, and Dan released her to stand by the window, listening, and watching the movement of the town. "What caused you to change your mind—throw down Roy Page?"

Janice moved near him and took his hand. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know! Every-

thing got so mixed up—my love for you, and—I didn't stop to reason it out. I just couldn't stand seeing you hurt." She ran a trembling hand across her face. "You always said that I'd bite off more than I could chew. Maybe I'm tired of living like this, with people pointing at me, and looking down their noses at me. Dad always said, 'Think of yourself and let the other guy shift for himself.' It looks like he was wrong."

Dan Alderman took her arm, and shoved her toward the door. "Your old man was wrong about a lot of things, but we don't have time to talk about it now. Page will be back here with his toughs, and I want to be out of this firetrap when he gets here."

He pulled her into the hall, and gave the stairs a quick look before descending. He stopped by the corner of the cashier's cage, and asked, "Want to get your money?"

Janice paused for a moment, and then shook her head. "There is nothing I want now, except your safety."

He grinned crookedly, and pulled her into the darkened back room. He cursed mildly as he barked his shins on a packing case, and fumbled for the door knob. He shoved the door open a crack, and glanced up and down the alley. He grunted once, and led her south in the littered darkness. He stopped in between the buildings to survey the street, and held her arm until they touched the edge of the boardwalk.

Janice stopped him with a pressure on his arm and said, "Dan, I can't go across the street to the hotel."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm *me*, that's why! They'll clap me in irons and throw me in jail. Your friends won't stand for it, Dan. Not even from you."

He laughed. "I didn't know I had any friends in Omaha." He shot a quick look up the street and pulled her with him. "I think it's worth taking a chance on." He stepped off the boardwalk, and she followed, lifting her skirts above the mud. The lights

of Omaha twinkled, and down the street a rider yelled, "There they go!" and Dan shoved her onto the safety of the hotel gallery as a rifle opened up.

He heard the spanging whine of the bullet as he made the steps, and pulled his gun, firing blindly at the winking flashes. Somewhere overhead, a window shattered with a crash, and the boom of a Sharps blasted holes into the night. The shadows near the wrecked hardware store shifted, and the red-yellow needle of gunfire laced the wall of the hotel, dimpling the soft wood with a lead design. Dan turned quickly, gun ready, as Judge Bockman scurried across the porch to kneel beside him. He grunted with surprise when he saw Janice, and asked bluntly, "What the devil is she doing here? Get her back across the street where she belongs."

DAN peered into the shadows near the Mercantile, and said, "She's with me—she's my responsibility."

"Responsibility!" the judge snorted. "You don't know the meaning of the word. Look at what's happening. You roused Page; now he's trying to shoot the town to pieces." He took Dan by the arm. "This is no good! This girl. . . . She's in it as deep as Page, maybe a little deeper because it was her old man that started all the thievery in this country."

Dan shot twice at a man who dodged between the feed store and the old hotel, and ducked as another fusilade thudded into the wall of the hotel. The sound of firing picked up, as men down the street shot from the second story windows. The night boiled with sound, and Dan pulled the judge close, saying, "I said that she was my responsibility, and I'll take care of her."

The judge snorted. "You're a bigger fool than you were five years ago. Who do you think you are, God? You can't make decisions like that. They're left up to a court of law. If you try to save her life, you'll pay for it—I'm warning you. You'll be fin-

ished in the Territory." He started to turn away, and Dan pulled him back.

"Don't leave now, Judge. The fun is only just starting. Take some good men and work your way across the street. Fire the Cattle King, and the red light district. Put a torch to everything that Page and his toughs have touched."

"Dan, you're mad! You can't do it that way. You have no right! Why, man, the fire might get out of hand and the whole town might burn."

Dan's face pulled into tight lines, and he said savagely, "Look out there, Judge. Page and his men have moved closer. Do you think they're going to stop now? They're out to get the whole town before the night's over, and if you want to save any of it, you'd better lay a torch to some of it!"

Judge Bockman beat Dan on the chest with his hand, yelling, "But it's unnecessary, all of this violence! You started it with your insane hatred of Roy Page. Anything to lick him, and look what you've got us into!"

Dan slapped him then, and said tightly, "What did you want me to do—preach to 'em, convert 'em, or something? You wanted a clean town. Well, I'm going to give you one before I ride out of here. I don't give a damn how many noses get broken. You knew how it would be when you sent for me, but you're getting chicken-livered now that it's gettin' rough. I broke the law to give you law in Omaha. That's a fair trade. Now, get out there and light those torches."

The judge released his breath in a long sigh, and said tonelessly, "All right, Dan, you win. We'll put the fire to them like you want, but I'm glad it isn't on my conscience." He stood up, a bent, old man, reluctant to leave; halted by the enormity of the thing he had agreed to do.

Dan looked into the street, and recharged the cylinder of his gun. The night beat with sound, and somewhere above a man gave a cry, rolled on the slanting roof of the porch,

and fell to the muddy street with a dull *thunk*. Dan motioned for Janice to stay down, and said, "I'm gonna get myself a man," and made the boardwalk in one leap. He heard Janice's frantic call, and ducked behind the watering trough as a hidden rifleman opened up from across the street. Dan heard the strident yells of the townsfolk, and the sound of gunfire rubbed against him, moving him to his feet. He paused in the mouth of the livery stable, and shot twice at a man hiding in a dimly lit stall. Dan heard the grunt as the breath left him, and the faint thump of the dying man's boots on the dirt floor came to him as he charged through the building to emerge into the alley.

He stopped to still the ragged sawing of his wind, and looked up and down the length of Platte Street. He picked out the dim pallor of a white shirt front, and recognized Roy Page standing in the doorway of the opera house. He listened to the firing in the street, and watched the pale streaks of fire creep up the south wall of the Cattle King.

The flickering flames made a dancing backdrop as running men laid their torches against the dry wood. The yelling rose in volume, and the south end of Freemont Street glowed redly against the blackness of the night. Dan stood there and watched the northeast wind fan the blaze into a roaring scythe of destruction. He stepped into the street, gun held hip-high, and called to the man in the doorway. "Come on out, Roy, and watch your dream go up in smoke!"

Roy Page tore his eyes away from the glow of the fire, and his face was a set blob of white as he whirled and shot.

Dan heard the bullet spatter in the mud near his feet, and raised his gun until the brass front sight crossed the white shirt. The Remington bucked against his palm, and the shirt slid down, sagging against the front of the building.

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DAN ran across the street, pausing to answer a shot from the wreckage of the hardware store. He watched a man bolt from the doorway, stop to fling a shot over his shoulder, and crumple as a rifleman from up the street laced him with lead. Dan took the hitchrail in one leap, and kicked the gun from Roy Page's hand as he tried to lift it for a final shot. He fisted a handful of the man's shirt, and hoisted him to a sitting position. His voice was rough and without regrets. "Your luck's about run out, Roy. You're not going to live to see me dead after all."

Page tried to grin, but pain caught him and he coughed. "You have the luck of the Irish, Bucko. Old man Moffat was scared of you, that's why he wanted you run out. He always said you was Indian—and would kill us all. Damned rotten joke . . . that's what it is."

Dan released his hold, and let the man sag against the building. He stood up, and watched the fire gut the south end of town. The windows winked glowingly at him, and the shadows flickered as he crossed the street, angling toward the hotel. His boots made a hollow thump as he fought his way through the milling men, and took the gallery steps two at a time.

He saw the grayness of her dress in a corner, the flare of the fire caressing her as she watched her world go up in a shower of sparks. She turned her head as he touched her, and came against him, crying softly.

He said, "Omaha is no longer a safe place for either of us. The men are busy fighting the fire now, but after it's over, they'll want to talk to me . . . and I won't have any answer for them."

"I'm no good for you, Dan! . . . You've lost everything because of me."

Dan watched the judge boil out of Dutch Emma's, torch waving, screaming girls running before him. The old man saw Dan, and threw down the torch, crossing to

mount the hotel steps. He mopped his brow with a handkerchief, and streaked the soot across his face.

"Damn," he muttered. "I'm getting too old for this sort of thing."

"Kinda enjoyed it though, didn't ya, Judge?"

"I did at that," he admitted, and swung his eyes to the girl standing close to Dan. "It also brings us back to her."

Dan Alderman shook his head. "No deal, Judge. We're riding west . . . California, maybe." He grinned, and handed the judge his badge. "Take this and hand it to someone else. I guess I'm not the type that should be carrying one of these things." He looked around him for a moment. The east wall of the Cattle King broke away from the rest of the structure, teetered for an uncertain moment, and crashed to the street in a shower of sparks. He said bitterly, "I don't think much of the law. I guess I never did," and stepped off the porch. He disappeared into the shadows; guiding the girl toward the stable.

Dan boosted her into a saddle, and they paused in the archway, watching the fire eat out the sin of Omaha. She leaned toward him, saying:

"Be sure, Dan . . . be sure you're not making a mistake."

He leaned toward her, placing his hand on the cantle of her saddle, and there was a devil in his eyes. "Honey, I'll let you in on a little secret. I ain't no marshal, haven't been for four days. When they asked me to come back, I wanted to do it on my own hook, without the law behind me. So I resigned. It was a personal fight, and I didn't want anyone to have to answer for what I did."

He laughed and pulled her against him for a kiss. He was a bold man, rough with his affection, and he felt the beat of life inside him, turning him reckless. He gave her a parting squeeze, and turning his horse, he led the way out of town. ★ ★ ★

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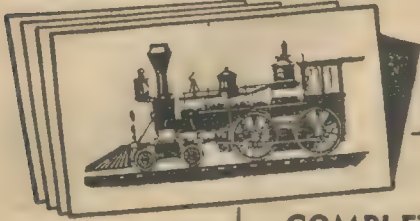
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(Continued from page 49)

over the way he had left him that afternoon. He didn't look up, but he moved one foot forward slightly and when he took his drink down he kept his eyes open, watching in the mirror. There was a group of men by the alley door, and Bath was down at the far end of the bar, his face pale and worried.

Otherwise, the place was empty, except for Hollis McCleary. Hollis was sitting on the floor by the iron stove, his face drawn in pain, his hands clutched tightly to his belly. He was staring at the Kid's back and as Ben watched he rolled on his side and tried to move toward the alley door, but he stopped abruptly, groaning, and doubled up his legs.

Ben turned away from him, the sickness in his stomach again, and said quietly, "Jesse." He watched Jesse turn slowly toward him, his nerves tight and expectant, and saw the look of feigned surprise, the half-smile on the man's face. He waited, felt the lightness coming into his legs, and heard Jesse say:

"I'm sorry, Ben, but they were askin' for it."

His voice was confident and quite unconcerned.

"There's always someone asking for it," Ben answered softly.

"And there's only one way to handle it," Jesse added, his voice abruptly changed now. "Isn't there, Ben?"

"Yes, I guess so, Jesse," Ben said quietly. "I guess I should have known this afternoon. I guess I was thinkin' that there was another way."

Balzan's eyes narrowed and the smile left his lips.

"Meaning what, Ben, meaning what?" he asked.

"I have to take you in, Jesse," Ben answered him. "I'm going to put you under arrest."

The Kid moved his gaze away as though

THE PISTOL KID RIDES HOME

he hadn't heard, then swung back swiftly, his eyes searching Halsman's face. He started to laugh, stopped, and said, "Don't try it, Ben. Don't try that with me."

Ben watched the Kid's eyes, saw the unflinching coldness there, and moved his hand up to the butt of the .44 at his side. He slipped it out of the holster, brought the muzzle up, and saw then the Kid's sudden unbelief. He heard Jesse say, "I rode clear over from Mungers. to see you, Ben. I don't want this."

"It's too late, Jesse," Ben answered. He stood unmoving, watching for the first sign of the Kid's draw, knowing surely that it would come. But he saw it too late. The blast hit him in the side and he reeled back, his own Colt jumping in his hand. He fell up against the bar, grasped it desperately, and tried to steady the gun. He saw Jesse slump back against the bar, saw him try to bring the gun up, and he fired again, slowly, carefully. He saw the look of surprise on the Kid's face, the little trickle of blood around his lips, and the curl at the corner of his mouth that was supposed to be a smile. And then the Kid let go of the bar, hung there balancing for a moment, and slumped to the floor.

Halsman turned and leaned wearily on the bar. In the mirror he could see the men coming back into the saloon. He watched Tad Gunter move carefully up to the Kid's body, saw him nudge it with his boot, and then the little man was beside him.

He didn't turn, and he only half felt Gunter's hand on his back. Bath came up, put two glasses in front of them, filled them, and moved hurriedly away. Gunter raised his glass, and in the mirror Ben could see the satisfaction on the man's face, the smugness. But it failed to stir him now.

"Here's to you, Halsman," the storekeeper said pleasantly.

"To the Kid," Halsman answered him, raising his glass. ★ ★ ★

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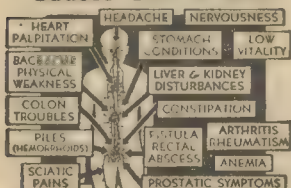
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 87)

and McDonald claim. But Bill Stewart had posted armed guards all around the area, so the work at hand went on in secret. Even so, Small and McDonald received a note from Stewart a short time later. It said:

First shipment of silver goes out at nine o'clock tomorrow morning.

Small and McDonald, in reply, sent a note back to Stewart. As usual, it was a complaint.

You picked tomorrow morning because you figured—and right, too—that we will be busy robbin' th' new bank which opens up for th' first time tomorrow. This is a mean and sneaky trick on yore part, Stewart.

The same busy messenger brought another short note back from Bill Stewart. It stated:

In that case, I will wait until nine the day after tomorrow morning to send out my silver. Don't want you boys to get cheated.

The holdup of the First Bank of Panamint was one of the strangest on record. It had been an open secret in the town, all the time the building was under construction, that Small and McDonald were going to hold it up on its first morning of being open for business. Even the banker and his teller knew about it. Therefore, when the Pair of Jacks walked in, guns in hand, and demanded the bank's money, the whole population was on hand to watch the performance. The teller, under instructions from his boss, immediately handed over six large canvas bags that were heavy and bulging, each with a small padlock at the opening. "This is the entire capital of this here financial house," the teller said. "Welcome to it."

The precious pair of bandits had no trouble in making their way out to a hide-out they had planned and stocked with

DEATH DRAWS A PAIR OF JACKS

food, water and extra horses for their getaway. Securely tying the six bank sacks to a burden horse, they got their things together and repaired part way down the mountain and made camp. There, close to the road over which the silver treasure wagon would have to pass in the morning, they slept soundly through the night.

True to his word, Bill Stewart dispatched a wagonload of silver bullion down the lonely and dangerous trail. And, true to their word, Small and McDonald were present, at a remote point, to hold it up.

When the two bandits stepped out in the road and stopped the wagon, the driver merely grinned. "I ain't armed, boys," he said. "Bill said to tell you to help yoreselves to th' silver."

He jerked a thumb back toward the tarpaulin-covered load.

Greedily, the Pair of Jacks flung the tarp aside. There, before their eyes, lay a veritable fortune in silver. A ton of virgin metal. But it was there in five big balls; five four-hundred-fifty-pound cannon balls of bright, gleaming silver. "Bill says to help yourselves, boys," repeated the driver. "But he wondered how you would get even one of these balls across th' desert. O' course, you could just take wagon an' all—but Bill said to remind you that he could easy get word of your coming with th' stolen balls to Bakersfield away ahead of you."

Small and MacDonald knew they were licked.

They permitted the driver to haul the precious load away.

"Anyways," sighed Jack Small, "we ain't broke. We still got th' bank money. Let's see how much it is."

As they opened sack after sack, another bitter truth presented itself; the sacks were full of rocks, old newspaper clippings and lead discs.

And, on top of the contents of one sack was a large note which said:

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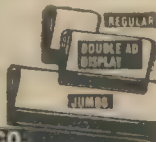
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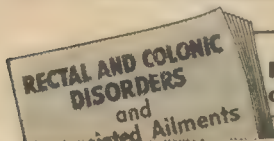
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

Small and McDonald—If you have any ideas of coming back to Panamint for revenge for this trick to get rid of you without bloodshed, come ahead. The newly formed vigilante committee will greet you, and hang you, if you ever set foot in Panamint again.

EVEN rugged and broad-minded Panamint had finally become fed up with the Pair of Jacks.

It was a forlorn pair of poverty-stricken bandits who wended their way toward Inyo. Even the \$30,000 they had come by honestly, through sale of their claim to Stewart, had been lost quickly over the gambling tables of Panamint. Such misfortune did not seem possible to two men whose future had looked so bright only a few short weeks ago. . . . They decided they would write a vigorous complaint about it, when they got to Inyo.

But the citizens of Inyo had other plans. Small and McDonald were seized by a fast growing and angry mob as soon as they arrived in town. The Bank of Inyo had been robbed, and a young and popular teller killed, by two bandits who had been identified by witnesses as Small and McDonald.

Actually, the affair had happened one week before—when Small and McDonald were still up in Panamint.

The mob, knowing the Pair of Jacks by reputation, at least, were stone deaf to the protestations of sheer innocence. The two were hustled out to the great oak at the edge of town and informally strung up.

Jack Small and Jack McDonald died for a crime they did not commit. For once, they had just cause to make a legitimate complaint. But they couldn't mail a complaint from hell.

★ ★ ★

Buy Bonds Today!

WESTERN BAROMETERS

By **ALLAN K. ECHOLS**

The old-time cowman knew what weather was coming up without any new-fangled contraptions. . . .

THE old-time rancher had to make use of what nature provided. And since he depended greatly on the weather, he looked about him for ways of forecasting the weather. He found that nature had well supplied him with accurate barometers.

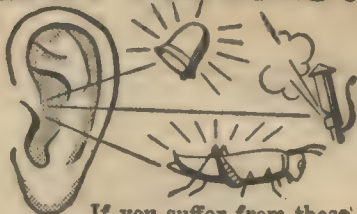
The matter of rain is important to a rancher at haying time. Once you start cutting hay, you've got to get it protected from getting wet; otherwise it will sour and you've lost your winter's feed.

Now, if you've got a meadow down by the creek somewhere, and begin to see the tracks that snakes have made getting out of the creek bottom and finding a nice dry spot on higher ground, get ready for rain. That creek is going to be rising pretty soon.

And of course, when you get your work done and hurry back to the house to tell your wife to get ready for rain, she will have already been preparing for it. She saw her flock of chickens oiling their feathers, and knew that there would be a down-pour within twenty-four hours.

But you might not have been haying in the bottom; you might have been building fence way up on the high ground. You are hot and sweaty, and cursing the heat. And then suddenly you've got more troubles. Swarms of buffalo gnats are surrounding your head, trying to crawl into your nose and mouth. You are not impatient, you are pleased. Your hope rises. There is not a cloud in the sky, but you know that a rain is coming, and you speed up your work.

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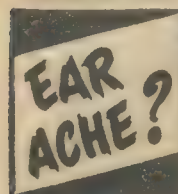
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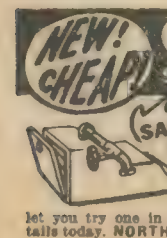
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

You build your fence along close to a prairie dog village, and you glance toward the settlement. The little rodents are building and repairing their dams around the holes that lead to their dens. Now your hopes for relief from the heat wave take on a new high, because you know that prairie dogs don't do this unless there is going to be a regular fence-post-floater of a rain, and they don't want the water to pour into their holes.

But you are so pessimistic about rain ever falling again in this heat-baked country that you want more assurance, though you know you don't need it. You turn your horse's head toward home in order to get things ready for the downpour. You are riding along the trail when you hear that vicious whirring sound which the rattlesnake is alleged to; but does not necessarily, make before he strikes.

This rattler is actually rattling mad. Your horse shies, but the rattler is not under his feet. You see the snake writhing down the path toward your horse, actually looking for trouble.

That is not according to Hoyle. Rattlers don't go looking for a fight except near a den at breeding time. And when there is going to be a change in the weather.

Since it is past breeding time, and there is no nearby den, you know that the prairie dog's evidence is being supported by the rattler. You thank him, kill him, and ride on home to get the tarp over the haystack in the corral.

You get home, and your favorite female coyote-hunting hound is trying to move her litter of baby puppies into the saddle shed, though you've tried to bar her from the shed many times. She and the cat are both determined to get their fitters into a dry place. You note this and let them in, knowing for sure now that it is going to rain. Dogs and cats all know in advance when rain is coming, just as hogs know in advance when a cold wave is on its way.

WESTERN BAROMETERS

You are feeling good now, knowing that long drouth is going to be broken. After supper, you step out onto the porch to look for clouds. You still don't see any signs of rain in the sky, but in the distance you hear a coyote howling. And when he howls just after dark, he is just going along with the other signs you have seen today. You see a small shadow here and there moving toward a low place out back, and you know that the toads are heading for what will soon be a mud hole.

You go indoors happy, and hit the hay. During the night you are suddenly awakened by the cannon-shot sound of summer thunder, and you look at the clock; it is three o'clock in the morning. In five minutes you hear the patter of raindrops falling.

You turn over and relax. Your neighbors of the animal kingdom had given you notice in time. They never fail you. ★ ★ ★

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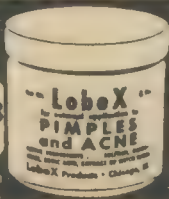
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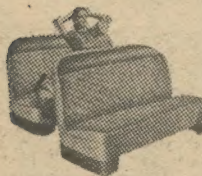
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RUN THE BEST "SHOE STORE BUSINESS" IN YOUR TOWN!

**Not Just Shoes...
But SPECIAL KINDS
OF SHOES!**

Big Full or Spare Time Profits!

**Satisfy Customers Most Stores
Are Not Able to Take Care Of!**

HERE'S THE BUSINESS YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED! YEAR 'ROUND — REPEAT ORDERS FROM FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS, EVERYBODY — STEADY PROFITS — UNLIMITED PROSPECTS — A QUALITY PRODUCT THAT'S NATIONALLY KNOWN! Start full or spare time with a "shoe store business" in your pocket. No expense of overhead, lights, etc. . . your big profit is ALL YOURS!

We set you up in this fine business FREE. See how easy it is to make BIG MONEY with Mason's new "Wonder Line" of shoes for men and women. Wonderful style, extra-comfort features; amazing range of sizes and widths. You feature over 150 styles of dress, sport and work shoes. Sizes from 5 to 18, widths AAAA to EEEE. No wonder no shoe store in your town can compete with you!

Make hundreds of extra dollars every month by selling specially designed Mason air-cushioned service shoes to filling station attendants, garage men, postmen, truck drivers, grocers, other people who work in stores, offices, industries. Watch your customer list grow—see how easy it is to earn exciting cash profits when customers RE-ORDER from you!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES SELL MASON SHOES QUICKLY FOR YOU!

Mason Shoes are nationally known for extra comfort features. Just hand prospects your Cut-away 1st-second Air Cushion Demonstrator. When they feel the foamy-soft, heel-to-toe Velvet-ez Air Cushion they realize how wonderfully comfortable it is to "Walk on air!" Then point out the sturdy steel shank for extra strength, plus special Air Cushion Arch Support. Mason Velvet-ez shoes are the only footwear sold direct that bears the famed Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal. Because these fine shoes are NOT sold in stores, people must buy from YOU!

WE START YOU ON THE WAY TO EXCITING PROFITS FREE!

No need to invest a cent, ever. We send you our Powerful Selling Outfit that has proved to be a real money-maker for so many thousands of men—absolutely FREE! We back you up with National Advertising, proved Sales Aids, even MORE, as soon as you show us you are really interested in making BIG MONEY.

"TERRIFIC INCOME!"



Edward McCarty of Illinois says: "The day I started to sell Mason Velvet-ez shoes was the luckiest day of my life! My income now is simply terrific!"



MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. MA-114
Chippewa Falls,
Wisconsin

SHOE STORE

STEEL SAFETY TOE SHOES!

The last word in foot safety! You feature Steel Safety Toe Shoes in many good-looking styles. Workers want to save feet from injury. Safety Toe shoes help do the job — plus EXTRA dollars into your bank account!

OUTSTANDING LEATHERS!

Imported Australian Kangaroo leather, Calfskin—lustrous; Shell Cordovan — Rugged Horsehide—actual shoe samples of these fine quality leathers furnished FREE to qualified men!

NEOPRENE and GRO-CORK SOLES and HEELS!

Work shoes have special features for different occupations. Oil-Resistant Du-Pont Neoprene soles, heels. Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant soles, heels wanted by service station men, garage men, factory workers, thousands in other occupations—help make shoes so fast-selling!

AIR-CUSHION COMFORT!

Foamy-soft Air-Cushion innersole cushions feet on thousands of air bubbles. Customers rave about comfort of "walking on air!" You get actual Air-Cushion demonstrator. Just say "Feel that Cushion." When customers do—they buy!

SEND TODAY . . . Start Your Own Profitable Business RIGHT AWAY!

DO YOU want to make steady EXTRA money? Do you want real security? Do you want to be able to afford the things you've always only dreamed about?—then send this coupon TODAY! We will rush your powerful Free Selling Outfit that features over 150 fast-selling Mason Shoe styles for men and women—Air-Cushion Demonstrator, How-To-Make-Money Booklet, everything you need to make money from the first hour!

SEND COUPON FOR FREE OUTFIT!

Mr. Ned Mason, Dept. MA-114
Mason Shoe Mfg. Co.
Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

I want to make really BIG MONEY with Mason shoes! Rush my FREE Selling Outfit so I can start running the best "Shoe Store Business" in my town.

Name
Address
Town State

Night after night . . . he kept his eyes on the

"Bachelor Girl" in apartment 8-A!

Every night detective Richie McAllister trained his binoculars on the brunette in apartment 8-A. He watched her get up in the morning, and go to bed at night. He waited . . . until the missing killer returned!

Then—gun in hand—Richie crept along the window ledge. Had he GUESSED RIGHT about the "bachelor girl" across the way? In a few nerve-shattering seconds he would know . . . You'll enjoy

THE NIGHT WATCH



YOU GET ALL THESE NEW "HITS" TOO!

EACH INDIVIDUALLY BOUND
FULL SIZED
HARD COVERED NEW BOOKS

THE KING IS DEAD by ELLERY QUEEN

Exactly on schedule, somebody killed sadistic Mr. Rendigo. But the murder weapon was an EMPTY gun! And it was "Fred" through a solid steel door!

TRIPLE JEOPARDY by REX STOUT

"I killed that cop!" said the scandal-hungry brunette. Was she lying, crazy, or telling the TRUTH? Nero Wolfe has to find out fast!

BLACK WIDOW by PATRICK QUENTIN

A girl dead in your apartment! Her suicide note blames you. Her angry friends say she was YOUR mistress. But YOU have seen her ONLY ONCE in your whole life!

NEVER BET YOUR LIFE by GEORGE H. COXE

Every cent the murdered gambler owned was willed to Dave Barnum. But Dave had to BET HIS LIFE to prove HE wasn't the killer!

ALIAS UNCLE HUGO by MANNING COLES

Here's a top-notch espionage yarn about a young heir to a throne . . . a Russian commissar . . . and Tommy Hambledon, secret agent extraordinaire!

MURDER WITH MIRRORS by AGATHA CHRISTIE

New best seller by one of the greatest mystery writers! Tells of a thrice-married woman . . . and a house swept by MURDER . . .



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